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August 17, 1886.

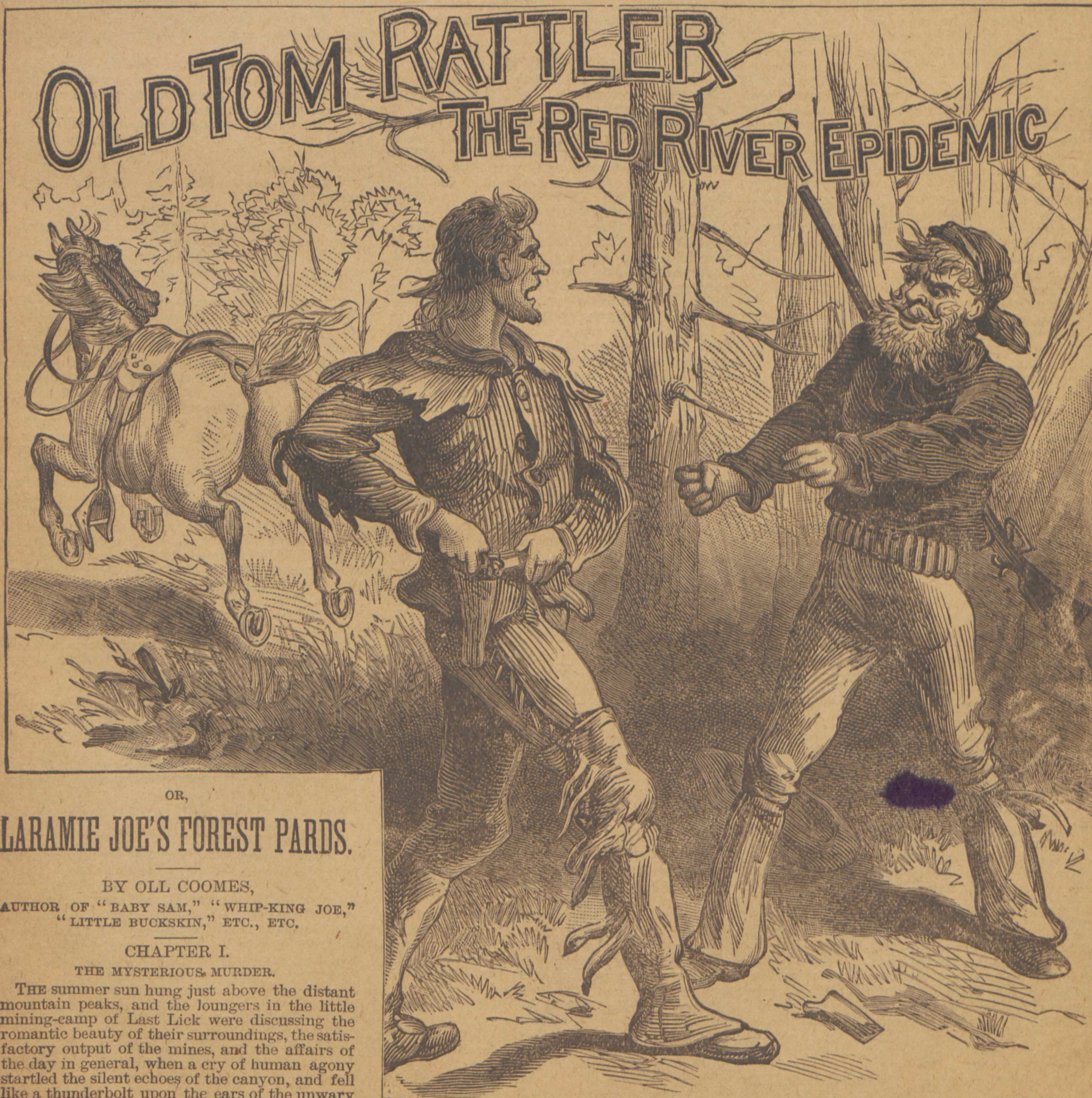
Vol. XIX.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 473.



OR,

LARAMIE JOE'S FOREST PARDS.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "BABY SAM," "WHIP-KING JOE,"
"LITTLE BUCKSKIN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS MURDER.

THE summer sun hung just above the distant mountain peaks, and the loungers in the little mining-camp of Last Lick were discussing the romantic beauty of their surroundings, the satisfactory output of the mines, and the affairs of the day in general, when a cry of human agony startled the silent echoes of the canyon, and fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of the unwary miners.

"I'M OLD TOM RATTLER—" "THER RED RIVER EPIDEMIC?" BROKE IN THE TALL MAN.

Last Lick was situated in one of the most wild, rugged and picturesque canyons of the mountains of northern Colorado. The bluffs sloping away gradually on the north, were clad in pine and cedar, whose foliage caught the sunlight and, like a great mirror reflected it in dazzling splendor against the dark frowning cliffs that hung over the camp on the south. Eastward the view was abruptly shut off by the hills, but westward up the canyon the distant mountain ranges could be dimly seen rising specter-like out of the blue haze and mist of heaven.

Last Lick was a mining-camp in every sense of the word, and since the outputs of minerals had been exceedingly rich, the place soon gained a local reputation that drew from other camps a class of men the place would have been much better off without. Gamblers and bummers flocked in from far and near. Cowboys from the Laramie Plains, also, came down occasionally and made merry with the miners and roughs and free with their revolvers to such an extent that the departure of those who lived through the "mellow round-up," as they were wont to term their visits, was hailed with a feeling of great relief.

But it was seldom in the glare of the sunlight that a pistol-shot, or an angry, disturbing voice was heard. Crime and drunkenness sought the deepest shadows of night in Last Lick, for there was a Vigilance Committee in the camp noted for its promptness of action in all cases that required their attention, and when, on that summer eve, that wail of agony rung through the camp while yet the sky was ablaze with radiant sunbeams, every man that heard it started with a shudder and involuntarily grasped the weapon at his hip.

Their first thoughts were of Indians, for there had been rumors of threatened troubles from this source, and this fear grew almost into a panic when, a few minutes later, the news spread through the camp that Judge Benoni Randall lay dying from a cruel wound inflicted by a barbed arrow that had been shot from a strong bow wielded by a strong and skillful arm!

The judge was unconscious when found, and before his daughter, a fair, sweet girl of seventeen, could reach his side he was dead. And his death became enshrouded in mystery, for a careful search of the surrounding country convinced all that not a red-skin was within fifty miles of the place.

That the judge was the victim of the murderous hand of a white man, who had chosen the bow and arrow with which to do the deed because it could be wielded in silence, there was but little doubt, and so a vigorous and thorough search for the assassin was at once made.

It was not known that Judge Randall had an enemy in camp. He was one of those upright, exemplary men whom all, high and low, loved and admired. He was honest, kind and intelligent, and was looked upon in Last Lick as its leading citizen. He was a widower with one child, Zulima, a fair and lovely girl whom all idolized for her gentleness and kindness of heart and as the miners gathered about the prostrate form of the dead man, and heard the heartrending cries of this poor orphaned girl, their hearts were touched with the deepest sympathy and from many an eye was brushed a tear.

And the sun, as if with shame, hid his red face behind the distant mountain range, and then the shadows of night began to gather in the valley as the shadows of sorrow had gathered in the breasts of the miners.

The body of the murdered man was removed to his cabin and an inquest held. On the day following it was consigned to the grave in the valley under the murmuring pines.

Poor Zulima was now alone so far as relatives in the camp was concerned, but she was not without friends. Wild and wicked as the camp was, every man and woman was eager and anxious to do something for her. And there were several pure and noble women there, whose sisterly and motherly love did much to lighten her burden of sorrow.

However, Zulima would have left the camp, and sought relatives in the East, had it not been that her father's claim was one of the best paying in the place, and that two or three of her father's friends volunteered to superintend her interest in the mine, and defend her honor so long as she should remain. Being a brave and sensible girl, and now wholly dependent upon herself for a livelihood, she took up her cross with all the determination and fortitude of a Christian woman.

In Sybil Bell, daughter of Major Robert Bell, who came to Last Lick after the death of Judge Randall, Zulima found a warm friend and companion. Sybil was a young lady of two-and-

twenty, perhaps. She was a dark-eyed, bewitching little beauty, with an imperious bearing and a strange fascination shining from the depths of her wonderful eyes.

She and Zulima met the day that she and her father came to the camp, and a mutual attraction seemed to spring up between them. Zulima invited her to her home, and the result of the intimacy was that the major and his queenly daughter found themselves installed in the Randall cabin with Zulima and her old servant, Tom Redrow, and his wife Deborah, where they were to remain until Mr. Bell could erect a home of his own.

In the mean time energetic efforts were being made to hunt down the murderer of Judge Randall. So effectually had the assassin covered up his tracks that there were some who thought it possible that the judge had suicided, but this idea was soon dismissed when it was shown that it was utterly impossible for the judge to have died by his own hand in the manner that he did.

After the Vigilantes had given up the search, the case was given into the hands of scouts and detectives, and, stimulated by the promise of a large reward, they worked as men never worked before, but all without avail. So finally the case was given up as one of those unfathomable mysteries that only the day of judgment could reveal.

CHAPTER II.

REV. PAUL POSTLE.

MONTHS have passed since the mysterious death of Judge Randall.

Evidently the search for the assassin had long since been discontinued, albeit there was a standing reward for the apprehension of the villain; but the people, busy as they were, and varied as were the changes and excitements of the camp, had not forgotten the dead man, nor did they neglect the comfort of his child.

In the mean time, Major Robert Bell had been a father, friend and counselor to Zulima, and in fact had, in a measure, filled the place that Judge Randall had occupied in the hearts of the miners. His daughter Sybil had been a sister and companion to the orphaned girl and partook largely of her father's popularity.

Up to this time the spiritual welfare of Last Lick had been almost wholly neglected. It is true, a minister of the Gospel, who had sought the mountain air for his health, had visited the camp some months before, and seeing the field unoccupied, endeavored to organize a meeting, but his efforts proved an ignominious failure, simply because the roughs of the place attended in a body and broke up the meeting, while the better elements of the camp were too busy to give attention to matters of so little importance to the place that they did not expect to make their home permanently.

But one day there came a second minister to the camp, or rather a gentleman who registered at the hotel as Rev. Paul Postle, and who soon gave out the word that he had come there to organize a religious meeting. This news proved very unwelcome to the gamblers and bummers, and resulted in their promptly calling a meeting to take action in the matter, and devise ways and means by which the Apostle Paul, as they had quickly transposed his name, should be suppressed, for they were "old-timers," and knew that a religious excitement in a mining-camp—an exceptional thing, indeed—was sure death to their business.

The result of the meeting was the appointment of Cale Bunce, Grizzly Dave and Sonora Steve—the latter a half-breed Mexican—as a committee to wait on the reverend gentleman and notify him that his room was far more preferable than his presence, and escort him beyond the confines of the camp and admonish him not to return under penalty of death. These three men were bullies and desperadoes who, their friends knew, would have no conscientious scruples about making away with the preacher, or the way they did it.

That afternoon when most of the miners were at work and all was quiet in camp, the trio called at the hotel where the preacher was stopping. The place was kept by a fat and jolly old German named Luke Freiner, who, in connection with the house, kept a bar where one or two kinds of liquors of uncertain quality were sold. The "Pick-and-Shovel," as the proprietor had facetiously named his house, was the only hotel in the camp, hence the preacher had no choice of lodging-places.

Besides the proprietor, but a single person was in the bar-room when the three bullies entered. This person was a youth of perhaps eighteen years. His dress was evidence of his

having recently come from the States. He was a stupid, sleepy-looking boy, who scarcely glanced at the trio when they entered.

"How you does, shentlemen?" said Freiner, stepping behind the bar to wait on his supposed customers.

"'Bout the same old way," was Grizzly Dave's reply.

"Well, what you takes, eh?" asked the landlord.

"Greek fire, if you've nothin' stouter," was the reply.

"Greek fire"—a local name for bad whisky—was set out, and the three helped themselves.

"Who's that kid you've got there, Luke?" asked Cale Bunce, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the sleepy-looking boy.

"His name is Albert Joslin—he ish a tender-foot poy what runs away and cooms Vest to grow mit de country up."

"He's been readin' some o' them 'are bad story papers and 'e come out here to be a hero, and kill road-agents and Ingins, and have a big bum o' a time. But ther West don't have to import its heroes—they grow here, eh, Grizzly Dave? But I say, Sour-kroust, that boy's dreadful homesick. You can tell that by the lop o' his lip. Say, boy, be you sleepy?"

"Naw, I'm not," drawled the boy, sullenly.

"Won't ye have somethin' to drink? Come up and take a glass o' water, anyhow, can't ye?"

"Don't want no water," was the boy's reply.

"I say, Cale," said Grizzly Dave, aside, "that 'are boy's not so green and sleepy as he might be fu'st thing ye know."

"I'll look furdur 'bout that, after while," replied Bunce, then turning to Freiner, continued: "Dutch, I understand you've got a new lodger—come yesterday?"

"Yaw; a pray-mans. He coom day 'gainst yesterday."

"Where is he now?" asked Sonora Steve.

"In his room—he sthays there much time—read he Pible me 'specks."

"Will you tell him to step out here?" said Grizzly. "Tell him that three gentlemen wants to interview him."

"Shentlemens," repeated Luke with a grin, "yaw, I tells him dot," and he waddled off and soon returned accompanied by the preacher.

At sight of the stranger the three roughs exchanged glances and then broke into a loud, coarse laugh. But this conduct did not disconcert the parson at all, and advancing he bowed politely to the three men, saying:

"My host informs me three gentlemen wish to see Paul Postle. I am that man."

The preacher was, most decidedly, an odd-looking person. He was apparently fifty years of age. He was tall and angular with a thin, bony face sparsely covered with gray whiskers. His long, thin hair was thrown back behind his ears in a "reverential" way. His mouth was rather large and wreathed in a serio-comical expression that suggested the clown rather than the preacher. He was clad in a suit of well-worn and shiny broadcloth that fit him like the proverbial "shirt on a bean-pole." In fact, in most respects, he had the meek and quiet air of a minister of the gospel, but there was a lack of grace and symmetry in his form, and a kind of sublime slouchiness in his dress that provoked the roughs into laughter.

"Wal, Preacher Postle," said Grizzly Dave in reply to Postle's introductory remarks, "I'm known in this camp as Grizzly Dave; that coyote is Cale Bunce, and that yaller-belly is Sonora Steve."

"Very odd names, I declare," said the parson, "but suggestive I presume. I'm glad to make your acquaintance, gentlemen."

"Mebby as what you'll have some Greek fire with us, parson," said Grizzly.

"Some what, sir?"

"Greek fire—suthin' to cut the cobwebs outen your throat—do you catch on?"

"I think I do," said Postle; "no, thank you. I never indulge in liquor, gentlemen. My calling forbids it."

"Oh, that's what they all say," replied Dave, "but the custom o' this camp requires that newcomers drink to the health o' the place, and that custom can't nor sha'n't be violated."

"I can freely drink to the health of the camp in a glass of water—pure, sweet, sparkling water—God's beverage—distilled in the dews of the heaven," replied the preacher.

"Water—water," repeated Dave, reflectively, then turning to Freiner, asked: "Sour-mash, do you keep that brand o' drinks?"

"Yaw—to wash my glasses in. A leetle drops on your face might your complexion do some goot."

"Oh, git along with yer monkeyin'! Set up four glasses o' reg'ler old Greek, with hemlock and ratsbane for flavor," exclaimed Grizzly, "and the parson will drink with us!"

This was said in a tone calculated to forestall any further refusal; but fixing his little eyes on the rough, the parson said slowly, deliberately:

"I tell you, sir, I don't drink!"

For a moment the gamblers were silenced. There was a firmness in the man's tone and a resolute look in his eyes that convinced the roughs that he had the courage and nerve to back his principles of sobriety. However, all they wanted was to pick a quarrel with the parson, and as they were three to one, they made up their minds that they would compel the parson to drink or take the consequences.

"Look here, ole gospel-mill," Grizzly Dave finally said, "you needn't go to buckin' us and showin' your 'ligious intolerance. You jist got to show your respects for Last Lick and her cit-erzens in the true old way by drinking a loud, long bumper with we three. There's yer liquor—take it like a man and don't foolish with Grizzly Dave! This ole Limberger here can tell you that I'm a bad, wild man from away over—he's see'd me chaw up men right in this room for refusin' to 'reconcile' with me. Now here, parson, hear me—take hold, or I'll take yer by the ears and fetch yer to the trough a-prancin'!"

"Stand back!" said Postle, receding a step, his face still wearing a cool, calm and resolute look.

Grizzly Dave saw he had an ugly customer, but he had gone too far now to back down; so he advanced to Postle's side and reached up to take him by the ear. But that act seemed a signal for a hidden thunderbolt, so it seemed to Grizzly Dave, to let drive into his very face, and the next thing the gambler was aware of was of rising to his feet in a dazed sort of a way at the other end of the room.

"What done that?—what hit me?" he asked, looking around him in bewilderment, the blood pouring from his nostrils.

"Dot preacher-mans," said old Luke, his red face aglow with inward delight; "he ish der Pilly Batterson what struck you—yaw, he ish der mans."

Sonora Steve and Cale Bunce were, to say the least, startled by this unexpected aggressive movement of the parson, who at once whirled, facing them, as if expecting they would attack him.

The Mexican was the first to recover his presence of mind, and then, true to his treacherous nature, he stooped and drawing a knife from his boot-leg, made a dart at the parson. But the latter was on the alert and before the villain could strike he planted his foot in the fellow's stomach and sent him, doubled up like a jack-knife, clear over the counter into the corner. At the same moment almost Postle gave Cale Bunce a scientific left-hander on the jaw that sent that worthy flying through the open door out into the street.

Albert Joslin, the sleepy-looking young tenderfoot seated on the opposite side of the building, regarded the scene with a faint smile on his boyish face and a peculiar twinkle in his blue eyes.

In the mean time Grizzly Dave, the bad-man-from-away-over, had regained his feet and was fumbling at his hip, where hung a six-shooter. But the parson was on the alert. He seemed to fully understand the situation and the kind of men he had to deal with, and in a twinkling—with the celerity of one accustomed to quick work—he had the rough covered with a der-ringer.

"Don't dare me further, Grizzly Dave," he said.

This was enough. Grizzly Dave saw that he had met more than his match and was beaten. His hand swung around to its natural position empty.

A muttered curse was upon his lips.

Luke Freiner had enjoyed the punishment of the desperadoes with inward delight, but when he saw the grizzly man-eater vanquished he laughed outright and said:

"Py shimminy kraut, David, you sthumps your toe, hey? You rhuns 'g'inst up a preacher-mans what can fight like der tuffyil and pray like a saint. Grizzly Davy, I guess what disshentlemans coom to Last Licks to sthay, hey? What you t'inks 'pout mush and milk when you halefs a spoon, hey?"

"Wal, g l dang it," said Grizzly Dave, his whole demeanor changed from that of a bully to a peaceful man, "ye needn't make fun o' a man's misfortune. I'm no hog—I know when I've enuff o' anything. Say, parson, put down

that pistol and I'll call our account square. You're an ole singed cat, you be, parson. I guess you've see'd service in a minin'-camp afore—I can tell by the way you strike, and the heavenly ease with which you swing a shooter into position. A man like you, parson, can have the eternal friendship o' Grizzly Dave. You're no milksop o' a preacher, and I say now that the fu'st meetin' you hold I want, to set right under the drip o' the sanctuary. I'm converted a'ready, and, stranger, if ye have spilled some o' my blood you can figger on me as backin' you hereafter. I'll confess that you've been too numerous for me, but you're the fu'st gol-danged rooster that ever give me the spur. But say, did yer bu'st Sonora Steve? He don't seem to materialize from behind that box."

"He coom 'round soon he sthraighten out der kinks out ob hesselef," said the landlord.

The Mexican heard these remarks and they seemed to exasperate him beyond control of himself, and, grasping his knife, he glided, in a crouching position, from behind the counter, and endeavored to plunge the knife into Postle's back, and he would have succeeded but for the prompt action of Albert Joslin, the sleepy-looking boy, who, like a young panther, sprang across the room and hurled the treacherous little Mexican into a corner ten feet away.

"Great Cott in Himmel!" exclaimed old Luke, "what now preaks loose 'round here? Py shimminy kraut! more cats mit der hair cooked off dem, hey?"

Sonora Steve, half rising, looked around him in a sort of confusion. His eyes met those of the young tenderfoot, who stood erect, his hitherto sleepy eyes fixed upon him with a look like that of a young tiger.

A low, muttered curse was hissed from the Mexican's lips.

The boy snarled at the outlaw and showed his teeth in a way that provoked old Luke to a fit of silent laughter.

The Mexican rose to his feet and grasped his knife as if preparing to leap upon the boy.

The youth shook his right arm—a revolver slipped from his big coat-sleeve and was caught in his hand with the skill of a juggler. Then, as he raised the weapon on a line with the Mexican's breast, he said:

"Try it, if you dare."

The Mexican made no reply, but turned and left the room, vanquished for the time, but no doubt inwardly swearing vengeance against the preacher and the tenderfoot youth.

As the Mexican went out a new-comer entered the hotel and asked:

"Luke, what's the matter with Cale Bunce? He's leaning against the house out here in great agony—acts as if he'd the lock-jaw."

"He gits his jaw smacked—dot preacher-mans he lets 'imself loose and flings his fists 'pout like tamnition and he knock der poys gollyvestward. Mister Major Bell, dot mans there pees der preacher, Paul Postle."

"Mr. Postle," said Major Bell, for he the new-comer was, extending his hand, "I am glad to make your acquaintance, and welcome you to Last Lick."

"Thank you, major," said Postle, looking straight into Bell's eyes with a searching look that almost made the major wince, "I hope I shall prove myself worthy of your confidence."

Major Bell was a man of forty-five years, with a fine physique, a full beard, a dark, brown eye, and withal a man of pleasant address and prepossessing appearance.

"Major," said Grizzly Dave, mopping the blood from his face, "I'm acquainted with ther 'Postle Paul, too—we met a while ago; he shook hands with me, but I'll be well in a day or two, if gangrene don't set in."

"From looks of things there's been a cyclone 'round here," observed the major.

"Yaw, dot preacher mans is ther critter—he do oop der cyclone pizness gallantly, but, hullo! what dot outfeet what coom there, hey?"

The "outfit" referred to was two horsemen that had drawn rein and dismounted in front of the Pick-and-Shovel. One of them was a tall man dressed in the suit of a Westerner, and well armed. The other was a little, nervous sort of a man with a decidedly foreign appearance and dress.

The latter entered the hotel to inquire about lodging, and as soon as he spoke Luke Freiner discovered that he was a Frenchman. He gave his name as Jules Laclede, and his profession as that of an artist. He said he was making a tour of the great West on horseback, sketching "ze grand mountain scenery," and called attention to his two pack-horses that were well loaded with his business outfit. He was an eccentric, fussy little chap of perhaps thirty years of age,

speaking English imperfectly; but he had not been in the hotel long before those present had made up their minds that there was a method in his eccentricities.

CHAPTER III.

STARTLING TRAGEDY.

ON the morning following the arrival of Jules Laclede at Last Lick, the miners on their way to work stopped in front of the "Pick-and-Shovel" and looked with admiration upon a splendid crayon picture of Major Robert Bell that hung against the outside of the building. The picture had been drawn by Laclede with chalk upon a heavy black canvas. It had been hastily yet fairly executed and was given as a sample of the artist's skill which received no little commendation. Under the picture was written in plain characters that all could read, the following:

"NOTICE.—To-night I will give at the Pick-and-Shovel an exhibition of my skill in sketching mountain scenery and comic cartoons, etc., etc. Everybody invited. Admission free."

"JULES LACLEDE, Artist."

And everybody that read the notice resolved to attend. Even the gamblers and old bummers resolved to go in force and give one evening to a change of life in camp.

Freiner's hotel was rather a commodious house. It was divided into three apartments—a bar, dining-room and kitchen. Each one was separated from the other by a curtain, so that by pushing these partitions aside the building could be thrown into one room. And this old Luke did as evening approached, and seats improvised of kegs, chairs, boxes and planks were arranged in the room.

The artist arranged his canvas at one end of the room. It was a heavy slate-colored canvas stretched upon an adjustable frame four by six feet in size.

By dark the whole population of Last Lick, except the few women in the camp, had gathered in the Pick-and-Shovel.

Conspicuous in the crowd was the tall form of Paul Postle who had gained no little notoriety in camp by the punishment of Grizzly Dave and his two friends the day before. Sonora Steve was also there, and his little snakish eyes searched the face of every individual there as if looking for some certain one. And he was; but that one, Albert Joslin, the sleepy-looking tenderfoot, was not there. He had left the camp that morning for parts unknown.

In due course of time Jules Laclede appeared before the audience, bowed low with the characteristic politeness of a Frenchman, then turning, crayon in hand, began his work. With the rapidity of lightning his hand flashed over the canvas black-board. Lines and curves, light and heavy, grew rapidly into a cobweb confusion; but out of this tangled mesh there soon appeared a splendid view of the mountain scenery looking westward from camp. It required no stretch of imagination to recognize it and the audience applauded the artist's first scene long and loud.

Laclede acknowledged the compliment with a smile and a polite bow; then he picked up an eraser and with a few strokes swept the picture from the canvas and, with a wave of his hand to the audience, again went to work.

Swiftly and deftly his hand flew up and down and over the canvas. The figure of a man of Fallstaffian proportions, and one tall and angular grew into form with marvelous rapidity. The fat man was represented as standing at a bar holding in his hand a mug of foaming beer, while on the other side stood the lean man reading a book. The features of the two men were the very last to receive the attention of the artist, and when the finishing touches had been put upon the faces, the audience broke into an uproarious applause, for, in the fat man all recognized the rotund face of Luke Freiner, and, in the other, the ungainly form and homely face of Rev. Paul Postle.

The two subjects of the cartoon enjoyed the fun with the audience, and it was several minutes before quiet could be restored.

Then the artist swept the figures off the board and began work on other subjects. Two men, an Irishman and a Chinaman, were represented at a game of cards, the game being shown at different stages by erasures and additions, ending with the Chinaman in the act of stealing a card from the deck while Pat was in the act of taking a drink of whisky. This cartoon was followed by a view of mountain scenery, a negro on a bucking broncho, and a love scene between a young squaw and an old white hunter—each and all of which brought down the house.

Brushing off the board the artist glanced over the audience and then with a bow and wave of

the hand turned and began another subject. His movements were not so rapid as before and his lines and curves more delicate and graceful.

It soon became apparent that he was drawing the head and bust of a female and there was no little curiosity and speculation as to the outcome. Some of the old gamblers, through force of habit, offered to bet on the result, but found no takers.

The artist worked away, leaving the face until the last; then, when he turned his attention to that part of the picture, and the features of the subject assumed an expression of familiarity under the magic touches of the workman, a deep and profound silence fell upon the audience. It was some minutes before the finishing touches were put on the picture, and the artist stood aside for its inspection, a smile of triumph and satisfaction upon his face. The picture was that of Zulima Randall, the cherished idol of the camp.

The audience broke into an applause that was long and continuous. It was not a wild, boisterous applause, but one full of the spirit of respect and admiration—such as would have been given to the maiden herself had she appeared before them.

When there finally came a lull in the excitement, an old miner sprung to his feet and shouted:

"Mister Artist, if you'll freeze that are picture there so's it won't rub off, I'll give you ten ounces o' gold for it."

"That iz impozzeble, monsieur," Laclede replied, with apparent regret.

"Wal, it's too gol-all-fired bad," added the miner, resuming his seat; "it looks like a waste to rub that pictier out."

After the audience had gazed upon the picture of the maiden for several minutes, the artist erased it, and then turning to the audience, said:

"Gentlemen, ze Reverend Paul Postle will now to you somethings say more better as I can say to you."

He stepped aside, and the Reverend Paul Postle advanced to the platform, and bowing, said:

"Gentlemen, the artist, Mr. Laclede, who speaks English so imperfectly, has requested me to say a few words to you in relation to another gift that he possesses in connection with that of an artist or caricaturist; he claims the power of being able to reveal some—not all—hidden things, and fathom what to many would be a mystery. He claims that the gift comes to him by birth, he being the seventh son of the seventh daughter born under the planet Jupiter. To some this idea may savor of superstition, but subsequent events will prove to you how much there is in the gift the gentleman lays claim to. I know nothing at all about it, and am only speaking for Mr. Laclede, and by his request. Now, in order to prove what he claims, his next sketch will be in connection with an event which, I am informed, threw a cloud of sorrow over your camp, and left your minds, your Vigilantes, and your detectives wrapt in mystery and confusion. I refer to the brutal murder of Judge Benoni Randall, and the unsolved mystery surrounding the crime."

At mention of this tragedy there was an audible commotion in the audience; but after a moment's pause Paul Postle continued:

"Mr. Laclede never saw Judge Randall dead or alive yet he authorized me to say that since he came here and heard of the tragedy, he went into a sleep or trance, and while in this state, saw Judge Randall. In fact, he is so positive that he saw the victim of that murderous arrow that he proposes to produce the face of the dead man on that canvas, and let you judge then of his powers as a clairvoyant. You who knew Benoni Randall can readily decide the matter when you see the picture. As for me, I never saw the judge, and therefore am incompetent to decide one way or the other. Mr. Laclede, you can now proceed."

"That's all humbuggery," a voice was heard to say.

A general murmur passed from one end of the room to the other. The curiosity of the audience had been worked up to the highest pitch of excitement. The artist had displayed such wonderful skill in the reproduction of things with which they were familiar, that—no difference how little faith they had in his clairvoyant powers—they felt he merited their respectful attention.

Rev. Paul Postle remained standing on the artist's right, facing the audience, whose eyes were now focused upon the canvas.

The artist first drew the life-sized figure of a man and clothed him in a miner's garb. Then,

as before, he drew the outlines of the head, and then stopped work, closing his eyes as if in deep reflection. He passed his hand over his brow, and finally with a start opened his eyes and resumed his work; and before he had finished the picture, exclamations of surprise from the lips of those nearest to the canvas were heard, and finally, a wild burst of surprise and wonder rung through the whole house. The face of Judge Randall was there before them as natural as had been the face of Zulima.

"That's the judge!" "That's him!" "A perfect pictier!" were some of the exclamations heard mingled with others bordering on superstitious belief.

Some one at a window outside made the remark loud enough to be heard inside that he was satisfied, and would bet that Laclede had seen Randall before his death and was familiar with his looks. But this assertion had no effect on the audience, for so completely had Laclede won the admiration of all that their confidence in him could not be shaken by aspersions.

After the audience had taken a good look at the judge's picture, the artist erased some parts of it and added new lines that changed the attitude of the body and the features to those of a man in great agony. He also added the picture of the shaft of an arrow protruding from the man's breast.

A low cry of horror ran through the crowd at sight of this picture, and expressions of indignation, and even low curses were heard all around the room.

While the audience were gazing upon the picture of Randall in the throes of death, the artist began work on another near the center of the canvas. First, he roughly drew a clump of bushes, and then further along he drew the figure of another man, holding in his hand a bow and arrow. But this figure he left headless, and turning to the crowd he said:

"Gentlemen, ze preacher say more to you 'bout ze tragedy."

Postle, who still stood near the artist, said:

"Gentlemen—men of Last Lick, now comes the climax—the most wonderful of this terrible tragedy, and the full test of this artist's mysterious and supernatural powers. I am told the most skillful detectives have been unable to track down the murderer of Judge Randall, even though you have offered a large reward for his apprehension. Now, then, this remarkable man claims that he has seen the face of that murderer in a trance as plainly as he saw the face of his victim. You now know something of his mysterious power. He produced the face of Judge Randall on the canvas, so you all have admitted; and, gentlemen, he will now undertake to produce on canvas the face of the murderer of your friend Randall!"

As Postle concluded Laclede advanced, and with evident nervousness, bowed to his audience. Then, crayon in hand, he turned and advanced to the canvas.

The preacher still remained standing, his right hand at his back and his eyes flashing keenly over the crowd as if he expected to read in the countenance of some one there evidence of guilt.

Laclede raised his hand to begin the promised revelation of the most mysterious mystery that had ever perplexed the minds of a community; but before he had made a single stroke a pistol flashed in one of the open windows, and the hand of the artist fell at his side and a cry of pain burst from his lips!

At the same instant almost—before a man in the house could move—before the sound of the pistol had scarcely crossed the room, the long arm of the Reverend Paul Postle was thrust out above the heads of the audience—a derring in his hand rung out with a spiteful crack, and a cry of agony arose on the night outside of the window!

CHAPTER IV.

WHO WAS PAUL POSTLE?

FIVE seconds after the report of Postle's pistol the Pick-and-Shovel was the scene of wild, mad confusion. A perfect panic ensued. Seats were overturned; men were knocked down and trampled upon; and to add to the confusion the lights were overturned and put out, and the frantic mob fought and crowded its way in darkness.

The yells, curses, and threats of the trampled men, the crash of doors and windows, and the bang and rattle of chairs and boxes were deafening. It was several minutes before the house was emptied; then Freiner lit a lamp and proceeded to take an inventory of his losses. But the first thing he noticed was Jules Laclede,

who was coming toward him holding in his left hand his right arm, which had been dreadfully lacerated by the bullet of his would-be assassin.

Outside, under the open window, a man lay prone upon the earth in dying agony—the victim of the parson's derring.

"Bring a light! bring a light, quick!" shouted a voice; "somebody's in a bad fix out here!"

A lamp was carried to the window. Its light streamed out upon the prostrate form of the man. A cry of surprise and horror burst from the lips of those standing around at the startling discovery they made. The man that lay weltering in his life-blood, that welled from a bullet-hole in the head, was Major Robert Bell!

And the hand of Rev. Paul Postle had done the deed.

Cries of vengeance rose on the night.

Major Bell was carried into the hotel and placed on a cot, and the doctor summoned.

Two miners, Casper Jones and Sandy Farrall, were sent to bring the major's daughter, Sybil, and her friend, Zulima Randall, to the bedside of the wounded man.

The doctor found the major unconscious.

"There's but one chance in a thousand for him," he said, after he had made an examination of his wounds.

This added new fuel to the flame that was already burning in the breasts of the excited miners.

"Where is the preacher? Where is the murderer?" was asked on all sides.

But no one answered, for no one knew. Rev. Paul Postle had disappeared; but like bloodhounds the excited miners went plunging through the camp in search of him.

To still add to the excitement of the hour, Jones and Farrall came running back to the hotel, almost breathless, with the startling intelligence that both Sybil Bell and Zulima Randall were not to be found. From old Aunt Deborah, Zulima's servant, who had just recovered consciousness from a blow on the head when they reached the house, they learned that four masked men had come here shortly after Major Bell had started to the entertainment, and seized, bound, and gagged the girls, and upon her—Deborah's—attempts to call for help, one of the villains had knocked her senseless. That the girls had been carried away into the mountains by those four outlaws there was not a doubt.

The news almost paralyzed those that first heard it.

The Vigilantes met at once in their room to take action in the cases that had so suddenly presented themselves to their consideration. The entire committee, with the exception of Ralph Hatton, one of their best men, was present.

A warm discussion over the tragic events at the Pick-and-Shovel and the abduction of Sybil and Zulima ensued.

Finally one member declared that he believed that the events of that night were the culminating acts in a foul conspiracy which had had its beginning in the murder of Judge Randall.

"This, then—" began another member, but he was interrupted by the guardian of the door with the announcement that the absent member, Ralph Hatton, had arrived. Mr. Hatton was admitted, and when seated, the speaker continued: "As I was going to say, Judson's assertion would, if true, involve Rev. Paul Postle and that artist in the conspiracy, and the sudden disappearance of the parson convinces me that his deductions are about right."

Several other members spoke in about the same strain; but finally Ralph Hatton arose and said:

"Brothers, I have listened in silence since I came in, to your theories of to-night's tragic events in this camp, and I am prepared to say that you are all, in a measure, wrong as to the part Rev. Paul Postle is playing. From the time I first met the preacher here in Last Lick I thought I knew him, or, at least, had seen him before; and after refreshing my memory I concluded I had seen him some years ago in Pueblo. In fact, I would have had no doubt of it had it not been for his language. The old fellow that I met at Pueblo was the worst butcher of the English language I ever met. He never spoke except in the most outlandish, whimsical and thoroughly Western vernacular, and I then made up my mind that he was one of those illiterate old mountaineers whose stock of expletives and slang was inexhaustible. But this man Postle has used very fair language, though in his talk to-night at the Pick-and-Shovel he used a few words that led me to suspect that my Pueblo acquaintance was before me dis-

guised as Paul Postle. And, brothers, my suspicions proved correct."

"Who is Paul Postle?" asked an impatient member.

"I'm coming to that," continued Hatton. "After the panic in the hotel to-night I ran against Postle in the dark outside, and I took the bull by the horns and called him by what I believed his true name to be."

"Hullo!" was his reply. "I b'lieve your name's Hatton, are it not?"

"I answered that it was, and he then asked me to step aside with him—he wanted to speak with me. While we were talking in the shadows we overheard the news of Sybil and Zulima's abduction. The old man was startled by the report, and said he must leave at once and endeavor to head off the girls' abductors, who he felt sure would go northward. He said he had a friend concealed in the mountains near; and that he would be back here as soon as possible."

He begged me to permit no violence to Jules Laclede, for the man was as innocent of wrong as a child unborn. He knew of the feeling against himself for the shooting of Bell, but said he'd explain that when he returned."

"Well, who the thunder is Paul Postle, anyhow?" asked a member, impatiently.

"Paul Postle is the noted old mountain detective, Kit Bandy."

CHAPTER V.

LARAMIE JOE, THE BOY KNIGHT.

THE scene of our story changes. It is night on the Laramie Plains.

A horseman headed northward across the great expanse moved along at a slow, swinging gallop under the mellow moonlight. He was a young man—in fact a boy yet in his teens, but he possessed a fine, robust physique, and a pleasant, handsome face that was flushed with health and the exuberance of a wild, free spirit. He was dressed in the garb of a ranchero, and was armed with a pair of revolvers and a Winchester carbine. He was mounted upon an easy-going, clean-limbed horse, that was well-caparisoned with bridle and silver-bespangled Mexican saddle.

A roll of blankets was strapped to the saddle behind, and on one side of the pommel in front hung a leather pouch and on the other a coiled lariat.

That this youth was familiar with this great plain and all its bewildering intricacies was evident from the fact of his moving along with nothing to guide him save his instinctive knowledge of his course.

Laramie Joe, the Boy Knight of the Plains, for he this youth really was, was at home, indeed, on the Laramie Plains, day or night; and more than all others—rangers, scouts and rancheros—was he known and feared. To the outlaws and Indians whose fastnesses were in surrounding hills, and who were confirmed horse and cattle-thieves, had he become a terror. For his perfect knowledge of the topography of the country, his skill as a trailer, his indomitable pluck and courage, his manliness of bearing and uncompromising honor had he been chosen over scores of others, and older men at that, as chief scout for the association of cattle-men throughout that country. This made him a kind of an independent ranger, but so great and constant were his duties that he was kept in the saddle almost day and night. If ever he did leave the plain for a week or a single day it was in the interest of his employers. And it was this interest that took him, a few days before we introduce him to the reader, far southward to the mining-camp of Last Lick. He had gone there in search of a couple of horse-thieves. He had gone in disguise, and there were few who had seen Albert Joslin, the boy tenderfoot, at the Pick-and-Shovel, that would have believed that he and the dashing Laramie Joe were one and the same person.

For many long miles the young knight galloped on over the plain taking no note of things around him. To him the flap of a night-bird's wing, or the snarl of a scampering wolf were no more than the sound of his own horse's hoofs on the plain.

It must have been near the hour of midnight when he came to a little clump of bushes that seemed to stand all alone on that great expanse. Here he drew rein and dismounted. Quickly he stripped the saddle and bridle from his horse and lariat it out to grass close alongside the little motte.

The young knight of the plains had put up for the night.

From the pommel of his saddle he took a horse-hair rope and laid it in a circle on the ground. Within this circle he spread a blanket,

and his couch was ready. He laid down, using his saddle for a pillow. At his right side he laid a revolver, at his left his carbine.

With no disturbing thoughts nor sounds—with a free heart and clear conscience—with an abiding faith in the protection of Divine Providence, he lay gazing up into the starry sky. As he had done often before in his nightly solitude on the plains, he traced out the stars with whose names he was familiar and meditated upon the infinite power of the Hand that had sent whirling through space a thousand worlds.

While thus engaged he saw a star suddenly shoot across the brow of heaven and go trailing its fiery course downward toward the south. His eyes followed it, and just where it seemed to plunge into the darkness of the earth, a black object seemed to spring up from the shadows against the sky. He watched it closely and saw that it moved, and presently he discovered another like it a little lower down. They looked like the heads of horsemen whose bodies and horses were below the line of light.

Turning over on his side, the young plainsman laid his ear to the ground and listened.

Then he started, and, springing to his feet, took up his weapon and blanket and carried them into the thicket.

"Horsemen are comin' as sure as my name is Joe Harris! and I wonder who in the name o' George Washington it can be coming in from that direction? Surely it can't be any of the boys from the Sweetwater ranches."

Leading his horse into the bushes he took a position where he could command a view of the plain and waited and watched. He knew the horsemen would pass near, for they were evidently following an old trail that ran hard by across the plain.

He had not long to wait. Two persons riding side by side came up and passed the motte at a canter, and to the utter surprise and astonishment of the boy he saw that one of them was a woman!

"Great guns!" the youth exclaimed to himself, "there's something wrong there or else I'm a wild Ojibway! No woman'd be galloping around over this plain at this time unless there was, and I rather think I'll inquire into the matter. There's nothin' in my contract with Colonel Bowen that prohibits me from lookin' after women-folks as well as Mavericks and horse-thieves, so here goes."

He hastily bridled and saddled his horse, rolled up his blanket and replaced them behind the saddle; then from the leather pouch before mentioned he took four ingeniously-constructed "mufflers," which he proceeded to slip on over his horse's feet, confining the same with a strap and buckle around the pastern, thereby rendering noiseless the animal's iron-shod hoofs.

This had been a favorite expedient with Laramie Joe. It had enabled him many times to approach a foe and deal deadly blows and then escape. More than once he had ridden into the very heart of an Indian camp unheard, and then escape before injury could be inflicted upon him, and for this reason the Indians had named him Pantherfoot.

As soon as all was ready the youth slung his carbine at his back by means of a strap, then leaped into his saddle, and with his reins in his left hand and revolver in the right, he rode from the thicket. And just as he did so, his ears were greeted by the sound of more passing hoofs, and the next moment two more horsemen came into view from behind the motte and galloped on up the old trail. To his profound astonishment he saw that one of this second pair was also a woman. He knew it was not the same two that had passed some minutes before, for he could still see them in the distance.

Moreover, he was satisfied from the very attitude—the drooping form and bowed head—of the second woman that she was not there of her own free will. Still, he thought he might be mistaken, and that it was fatigue that was telling upon her strength. Of this he must make sure before offering violence, and so settling himself in his saddle, he spoke to his trained animal, which bounded away, its muffled hoofs creating but the faintest sound.

Straight toward the unknown pair he galloped, approaching them, of course, from behind.

The first intimation the unknown had of any one's presence was by the sudden start of their horses, but before the man had caught sight of the boy, the young dare-devil dashed in between him and the woman, and presenting a revolver at the astounded man's head, exclaimed:

"Halt and throw up your hands! or I'll blow your brains all over Laramie Plateau!"

"Laramie Joe!" exclaimed the startled man, with an oath.

"Yes, sir, that's who I am," responded Joe; "are you goin' to throw up your hands?"

A little cry—half joy and half fear—burst from the lips of the woman.

"Madam," said the young knight, though keeping his eyes fixed on the man, "I rather think you're in trouble."

"Yes, sir, that man—" the woman began, but Joe heard no more, for the man's horse suddenly shied off to one side, and the fellow endeavored to take advantage of the movement by drawing his revolver; but the quick eye of the boy detected the movement, his revolver rung out on the still night, a groan escaped the outlaw's lips, he swayed forward, clutched at the horn of his saddle and then tumbled to the earth, while his horse sped away in affright over the plain.

A cry of terror burst from the woman's lips.

Laramie Joe now turned in his saddle and gazed down into the woman's face that was plainly visible in the moonlight; and it was his turn now to meet with surprise. He saw that the face was that of a young girl—a face of remarkable beauty, notwithstanding the distressed and troubled expression it bore. Reaching out, the boy took the reins of her horse and stopped both it and his own.

"Young lady," he said, "may I ask who you are?"

"Zulima Randall," she replied.

"Of Last Lick mining-camp?"

"Yes, sir."

"Great guns! what does this mean, your presence here?"

"I was abducted and carried away by sheer force; but I heard that outlaw calling you Laramie Joe; are you that gentleman?"

"I am, Miss Randall."

"Then I have found a friend," she added, in a tone more hopeful.

"I'm your friend as long as I've life, miss," he assured her; "but while this is the first time you ever saw me, I had the pleasure of seeing you in Last Lick about a week ago."

"Indeed! I never heard that Laramie Joe was in the camp," Zulima replied, her courage and spirits reviving.

"I was there in disguise, looking for a pair of horse-thieves; but, Miss Randall, when were you abducted?"

"About five days ago to-night."

"Then it was one day after I left there."

"And my beloved friend, Sybil Bell, was carried away at the same time."

"Indeed! What, in Heaven's name, was the miners doing that such a thing should happen?"

"They were all at the Pick-and-Shovel attending an entertainment given by a French artist, whom I now believe to be a confederate of the outlaws. But, Laramie Joe, the outlaw with Sybil is but a short distance on ahead of us."

"Yes, and yonder the outlaw comes riding back this way. The report of my revolver must have reached his ears, and he's coming back to inquire into the matter. Now, if I can have as good luck with him as I had with your escort, Miss Bell will soon be a free girl also."

"Oh, sir, you are very brave and kind!" the little maiden exclaimed, her face growing bright with hope and joy.

"Thank you, miss," Joe responded, his heart heaving with manly pride over the compliment the fair girl bestowed upon him.

Unslinging his carbine, he awaited the approach of the supposed outlaw. The latter, however, seemed to have mistrusted something of the true situation, for, when about a hundred yards away, he drew rein. He remained quiet for several minutes, then called out:

"Hullo, Barkdale, what's wrong?"

Receiving no answer, the fellow finally whirled his horse and rode away.

Laramie Joe seeing his movement, sent a shot after him, but with no other known effect than to quicken the speed of his horse in flight.

"The gal-thief takes the hint and cuts out," Joe said.

"Oh, poor Sybil!" cried Zulima.

The young knight was now in a quandary. He could not think of leaving Zulima there in the open plain alone in her weak and almost exhausted condition, nor could he bear the thought of allowing the other outlaw to escape with Sybil without making some effort to rescue her. So he finally concluded that he would conduct Zulima back to the little motte and assist her to dismount and arrange a temporary bower where she could rest in comfort until he returned from pursuit of the outlaw.

To this arrangement Zulima readily consented, and they turned and started back toward the grove.

"Oh, why have I got to suffer so much?" the maiden exclaimed, as some new fear seemed to seize upon her mind.

"The cussedness of man is at the bottom of it all, Miss Randall," the boy replied, "but they'll all smoke for it, now mind."

"Laramie Joe, it looks to me as though we were the victims of a great conspiracy."

"You may be, miss; God only knows."

"Sybil thinks that preacher, Paul Postle, and the artist that came to Last Lick are at the bottom of all."

"What made her think so?"

"Because we were carried away while all the men were at the entertainment given by the artist, and she thinks it was gotten up on purpose to draw them there so that we could be carried away."

"Well, Miss Sybil is mistaken as to Rev. Paul Postle," said Laramie Joe.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes; he was in your camp under false colors—he is not a preacher, but Kit Bandy, the noted old detective."

"Indeed? Oh, I am glad to hear it!"

"Yes, and I wouldn't be surprised to see Bandy along this way before long; but here we are, Miss Randall."

They had reached the motte, and, dismounting, Joe assisted Zulima from her horse and conducted her into the grove. With his knife he cut some bushes and constructed a little bower for her. Inside of this he then spread his own blankets saying:

"Now, Miss Randall, that's the best I can do for your comfort, but I'd advise you to lie down, and, if you can, take a good, sound sleep. I will go now in pursuit of Sybil, and will try and get back before morning. If, however, I should not return by that time, you had better mount your horse and get where you can find water and food. Ride straight toward the rising sun—keep the sun right before you for three hours' lively ride. It will take you a little out of your way, but it will be the safest—it will bring you to Deer Creek, down which stream you must follow until you strike Redmon's cattle-ranch, where you will find friends and protectors."

Zulima repeated his instructions to make sure she understood him aright, then thanked him for his kindness with all the fervency of her grateful woman's nature.

After addressing a few more words of encouragement to the maiden, the boy bade her good-night, leaped into his saddle and galloped away northward.

Zulima watched him until he had disappeared in the distance, then, as a sense of her loneliness rushed across her mind, she went back and knelt down in her bower, and lifting her face toward heaven, poured out her heart's emotions in prayer to her Heavenly Father, humbly supplicating Him for strength and courage to bear her own burden, and for the safe return of her rescuer, the brave and gallant young knight of her girlish dreams.

CHAPTER VI.

HAIL FELLOWS WELL MET.

THE horse from which the outlaw—the victim of Laramie Joe's revolver—tumbled was a spirited animal, and, taking fright at the sound of the boy's revolver and the scent of blood that spurted from the man's wound upon its withers, it frantically dashed away over the plain. It did not keep the old Indian trail it had followed since crossing the Sweetwater, but sped away toward the northeast, the heavy swinging stirrups lashing it in the sides at every bound and goading it on almost to madness. On and on it sped swiftly, wildly. The miles traversed grew rapidly behind it. Now and then a hungry coyote would spring from his concealment with a snappish bark and give pursuit.

In this way the terrified beast kept on until the breaks and canyons trending away toward the North Fork of the Platte river were reached. These breaks were in some places covered with thickets of brush and others with growths of pine timber. The horse entered a patch of low, stunted plum bushes, and there it was suddenly brought to a halt by the bridle-rein, that had fallen over its head, catching fast on a bush.

After one or two ineffectual efforts to release itself, the panting animal gave up and became quiet, and presently it began to crop the bushes within reach. While thus engaged there was a rustle in the thicket near. The horse pricked up its ears.

"Whoa, now, ole boy," suddenly came a human voice from the bushes hard by; "whoa"—it went on—"be easy, ole feller—easy, old hossy, and I'll he'p you out o' yer preedicamint—ya-att, now, pony."

Then a man rose up and advanced to the side of the horse, and taking the reins unloosened them and began patting the trembling animal on the neck.

The man was dressed in the garb of a hunter. He must have been fifty odd years of age, small of stature, with keen gray eyes overhung with shaggy brows, a rather prominent nose and a sharp chin covered with short, stubby whiskers. He carried a Sharpe's rifle and around his waist was a cartridge-belt, well filled, and to which was suspended a sheathed hunting-knife.

After he had quieted the horse, the old man said, as if the animal was an intelligent being:

"I guess, old hossy, you've been doin' some lively scratchin', but then I guess from your build you're put up for lively work, and as I'm in need o' a hoss I'll cabbage you—Ah! by the great Rosycrusians! here's blood on you ole feller, and I'll bet it's the blood o' your other master. Been in some kind o' a racket, haven't ye, ole hoss? Snakes! how I do wish you could talk—tell me the story o' that blood, but, as ye can't, I'll adopt ye as strayed or stolen, and mount you and ride over to camp."

So saying, the old borderman slung his rifle at his back, placed his foot in the stirrup, and was in the act of raising himself into the saddle when, to his surprise and horror, he beheld the head and face of a man who stood peering into his very eyes from the opposite side of the horse.

This stranger had approached unheard or unseen, and this stealthy action had led the old borderman to the conclusion that he was an enemy, and dropping his foot from the stirrup, he shoved his hand over the saddle quick as a flash of lightning and caught the stranger by the hair of the head. At the same time, however, the stranger flung a long arm over the horse and seized the borderman by his scanty locks and held him fast.

This unnatural proceeding excited the horse so that it made a sudden lunge forward, breaking the hold of the foes, and flinging them headlong to the earth a rod apart.

Quick almost as they had gone down the two men arose and confronted each other—each fingering at his belt for a weapon.

"Cuss your ganglin' ole carcass!" hissed the little borderman through his set teeth, his eyes blazing with fury, "come on, and I'll rip you open like a bean pod—I'll fang you in the liver!"

"Ha! you bushy-faced little weasel," retorted the other, a tall, slim man, dressed in a suit half-savage and half-plainsman, "advance one step and I'll tunnel yer carcass with lead so's a coyote can gallop through you. Understand I'm not to be foolshed with—I'm a hull regiment o'—"

"Busrangers," interrupted the little borderer, "a confounded bush-louse. I've killed whole acres o' sich things as you."

"You're a holy untamed tempest, ar'n't you?"

"I'm old Tom Rattler—"

"Ther Red River Epidemic?" broke in the tall man.

"You bet your fuzzy old liver I'm that persimmon, ripe, too, for anything from a bush-rat to a red-skin."

"Rattler, I've heard o' you, now permit me to introduct myself as Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy."

"Do you mean to say you're Kit Bandy, the old mountain buck-goat detective?"

"The same, sir."

"I don't b'lieve it—I b'lieve you're lyin' like Ananias and Sapphira. I've been told that Kit Bandy war a handsome man; you're uglier'n a Texas steer with a bob tail."

"Stranger—Old Rattler"—began the other, but he was cut short by a wild, fiendish yell from behind Old Rattler, and half a score of savages burst from the bushes and rushed toward the two disputants. One of them was so close upon Rattler that his tomahawk was raised to strike, but before he could deal the deadly blow, the pistol in the hand of Kit Bandy rung out and the red-skin fell.

With a bound Old Rattler reached Bandy's side, saying:

"You are Kit Bandy, by the great Rosycrusians!"

"Come, or your tresses 'll be yanked," was Bandy's response, as he turned and fled with the speed of a deer.

Old Rattler followed close at his heels, no longer doubting the friendship of the man who had saved his life.

The savages gave chase yelling like demons possessed, but the fugitives finally dodged into a thicket of tall bushes and eluded them.

Still the two old men did not stop until they had reached a place of safety far from where they had started. Rattler was the first to speak after they had stopped.

"Yes, you must be old Kit Bandy," he said, "but I never s'posed Kit war sich an ornery-lookin' old rat as you be," and the old fellow indulged in a low, good-natured laugh.

"I'll confess, Rattler, that I'm not so pretty as you are. That chaparral o' whiskers on your face gives you such a mature look like a sun-scorched brush patch, and that six by ten mouth looks so rosebuddish, and that anchor-fluke nose crooks so delicately that any one 'd take you for old Adonis hisself."

"Thanks fer yer lavi-h praises, Bandy, but say, ole smokestack, you did me a good favor by shootin' that Ingin, and now if you be lost up here on the plateau I'll gladly conduct you out o' danger."

"Lost nothin'; I can git out and you needn't distress yourself 'bout it, either. A man that's see'd as much domestic war and thunder as I, has a fully-developed faculty for gettin' out o' trouble in a hurry."

"Then you be a married man, Bandy?"

"I was, I am, I am not, jist as you please. I'm a wanderin' Jew now. Domestic life didn't jibe well with me and Sabina. We didn't work well in the harness together. She hung back on the breechin' and I kicked over the traces. But Sabina had a will o' her own and when she blowed her horn the walls o' Jericho had to git. I was that wall and I got—I got out into the mountains in the midst o' Ingins, bears, wolves, snakes and outlaws, and intrenched behind these I lived happy. But she left her mark on me, Rattler. If it war light, Rattler, I could show you a scar big as the Rattlesnake Mountains runnin' across my head where 'Bina fetched me one with the poker, and on this cheek is a Devil's Gorge where she flipped from the tips o' her rosy fingers a huntin'-knife. Oh! I'm a total wreck, Rat; I'm the Ruins o' Babylon, the downfall o' the Roman Empire, the deestruction o' Herculan-eum—"

"And a hull full Insane Asylum," interrupted Rattler; "old man, you're a blushin' old damsel, a lily-lipped bummer, an ox-eyed daisy; but all this classical jokin' aside, Bandy, who does that hoss belong to over which we looked into each other's majestic countenances?"

"I don't know; but I *did* know it didn't b'long to you and I made up my mind you war a hoss-thief and that I'd take you in. But I'm beginnin' to think now that all's not as serene as a nest o' suckin' doves on the Laramie Plains. Them Ingins are hereaways stealin' hosses and cattle, I'll bet, and I presume the outlaws are at work, also, in that business as well as gal-stealin'."

"Ah! somebody's gals in trouble, Bandy?"

"Two o' the fairest in the West war carried away from Last Lick camp several days ago. They war fetched off up in this direction and I'm here lookin' for 'em."

"Rosycrusians! if I can do anything to help count me in, too, Bandy," said Rattler.

"All right, old man—glad to have your help. I've been lookin' for a young kid named Laramie Joe. He's up on the Plateau somewhars, and if I can only strike him he'll be worth a dozen men, for he knows every foot o' this kentry—mountains and all; and besides, he's a hull nest o' full-grown wildcats in a fight."

"I've heard o' him, Bandy, and would like to meet him. For frolicsome fun give me a good, brave boy every pop. I knew a boy once, and we chummed together durin' a red-hot Ingin war in Minnesota, and I tell you he war a wall-eyed daisy. Why, bless your ugly old eyes, Bandy, we war a pair o' wild sneezers and you'd ought to see'd the ha'r fly. But poor Deerhunter! he's gone now."

"Dead?" asked Old Kit.

"No, married."

"Poor Deerhunter, sure enough. If he's drank to the dregs of domestic infelicity as I have, mebbly he's a wall-eyed lunatic by this time, skulkin' on the plains or in the mountains."

"No, he's a happy man, Kit, for he had sense enough to select a wife that had a heart and brain; but not changin' the subject, I wouldn't mind a little whirl with the red-skins. It's been a long time since I war on the trail, and though my hand and arm are not so steady as they once war, my spirit is young and vinegarish yet. I jist rambled off up this way to see what the prospect 'd be for game when the peltry season

set in. Scapls o' red-rinds, howsumever, are ripe at all seasons of the year."

Thus the two old plainsmen conversed for hours, and ere they were scarcely aware of the fact the red streaks of dawn shot athwart the eastern sky and soon burst into the flame of day.

"Bandy," said Rattler, when they began to think of moving away, "I'm hungry as a b'ar, and purpose to have some fresh meat for breakfast if it's nothin' but sizzled coyote. If you'll light a fire I'll get the game."

"All right, Rattler, bring on yer ki-ote."

Rattler shouldered his rifle and started off into the hills in search of game.

Old Kit laid aside his weapons and set about gathering dry limbs and twigs for fuel. While thus engaged he was startled by the sound of hoofed feet. Turning quickly, with arms full of limbs, he was startled beyond expression to see before him, seated upon a horse, the slender figure of a masked woman, who held a cocked revolver leveled full upon him. And he was astounded—thunderstruck—when there came to his ears from the lips of that woman the command:

"Paul Postle—murderer—assassin, throw up your hands, for you are my prisoner!"

In an instant the truth of the situation flashed through the old man's brain. He dropped his wood and threw up his hands, and for the first time in his eventful life Kit Bandy was brought to bay by a woman.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN RACHEL, THE FEMALE OUTLAW.

WITH uplifted hands, Kit Bandy stood with his eyes fixed upon the masked female who held him at bay with a drawn and cocked revolver. That he was surprised and astounded was evident from his momentary confusion. The name by which he had been addressed, the dual charge that accompanied it were evidence of the fact that the woman had heard of his exploits at Last Lick; and the steadiness of her hand and the ringing firmness of her voice, told him that she had the nerve, the will and the determination to shoot did he fail to comply with her command.

As the old detective stood with his hands uplifted, he realized very readily that he was in no enviable position to be seen by one who had heard so much of the skill and undaunted courage of Kit Bandy. However, the old man's mind acted swiftly. He had heard—yet he did not credit the story—that there was a band of outlaws somewhere in the Rattlesnake Mountains whose leader was a woman by the name of Captain Rachel; and if there was anything of truth in the story, then that woman before him was Captain Rachel, and if so, she had followers near—perhaps at that very moment enjoying, from some hiding-place, the spectacle of his humiliating position. But he had been in tight places before, and having the utmost faith in his ability to outgeneral the woman through his prolific fund of expedients, he appeared to accept the situation in the spirit of a joke, and when he threw up his hands he said:

"All right, my lady, I'm your ownest to command. You've got me, and I'm old enough to know it, but by the way you address me, I fear, my lady, that you're mistaken as to the man you are after."

"I am not, sir," the woman replied in a voice that was not at all musical; "you are Rev. Paul Postle, *alias* Kit Bandy, the mountain detective, and you are at the end of your deceptive, atrocious career."

"Well, it's jist as you say 'bout my career, but you are away off on your man Postle-Bandy. If you'd arriv' awhile sooner, you'd found Bandy here. He left 'bout twenty minutes ago. I am Old Tom Rattler, woman, from over on the Chugwater, that's who I are, but then if you are wantin' a husband, take me in preference to Bandy, for I'm a han'somer man, and besides, Bandy's sich an onmitigated old liar. Take me off to your wild mountain grotto, oh, fair lady, and make me your prince, your mate. I know you're a sweet, lovely gal—your graceful form and noble mien tells me so, though I see not your face. Take me away to your palatial nest, for I'm yours to love, cherish and protect—I'm your hero, your knight, your crusader, your dashin' ox-eyed dandy."

"Your silly twaddle will avail you nothing, old scoundrel," the keen-witted woman replied, "nor can you deceive me as to who you are."

You are the man that shot Major Robert Bell of Last Lick."

"And even if that war so, are you Major Bell's avengeress?"

"I am," she replied with measured accents.

"Then you must be Captain Rachel, the she-outlaw."

"I am Captain Rachel, and if you know aught of her, you know your doom is sealed."

"I've heard the capt'in war a dancin' devil, but I don't believe you are, Rachel. But what's Major Bell's trouble to you, anyhow? War you—Hullo! who's that comin' there?"

A low sardonic laugh escaped the veiled woman's lips.

"Those are some of the followers of Captain Rachel."

Six mounted outlaws came in sight from around a wooded point and rode toward them. The face of one of them was masked—the others being rough, bearded and desperate-looking men, each of whom carried a revolver in his hand.

A loud, coarse laugh, that rung through the woods in demoniac glee, burst from the men's lips at sight of the old detective and the woman.

"Hurrah for Captain Rachel!" yelled one of them, and again the six made the hills ring with Satanic voices.

"Captain Rachel," said the masked outlaw, "that's our man, the Apostle Paul, the gay and festive Kit Bandy."

"He denies that he is Bandy," the woman said.

"No difference, we can run him in as a suspicious character," said the masked outlaw, whose voice Bandy felt assured he had heard before.

Kit found that he was in a worse difficulty than he had at first supposed. His weapons were fully two rods away, and his fertile brain after all could conceive no possible chance of escape. He finally began to grow uneasy lest Rattler should return and unknowingly place himself in the same trap, for in the old hunter's aid now centered his only hope of escape.

"Old man," Captain Rachel said, "you will have to submit to have your hands bound and accompany us to headquarters where your case will receive further attention."

"Shoot him down there! why bother with him?" exclaimed an outlaw: "if he's Bandy, he's a slippery old cuss, and may get away. A bird in the hand's wuth two in the bush."

"No, no, we have use for him," said Captain Rachel; "I desire to have a talk with him before he dies if he is whom we think, Kit Bandy."

By this remark Kit knew the woman was not sure of his identity, although the masked man had declared he was, and so the old fellow began to speculate as to how he could take advantage of their doubt. While his thoughts were thus busied, an outlaw dismounted, and taking a lariat from his saddle-bow, advanced to bind the old detective's hands. Bandy saw his movements and divined his intentions, and the spirit of his combativeness asserted itself beyond control, and the instant the fellow came within reach, his right arm fell and his bony fist was driven into the villain's face with such sudden and terrific force as to knock him down.

So quickly and unexpectedly was this lick given, that the outlaws were for a moment confused by the audacity of the act, and before they could resent the blow, a rifle off in the bushes rung out, and an outlaw, uttering a cry of agony, tumbled from his horse. And this shot was followed by a second one, but from a different direction, and the bullet, grazing the hip of Captain Rachel's horse, caused the animal to lunge forward with pain and affright, and, despite the efforts of the woman, who dropped her revolver and gave her attention to her horse, it dashed away down the canyon at a furious speed. In the midst of the confusion that reigned, Laramie Joe, the Boy Knight of the Plains, suddenly glided from around a bluff—his horse's hoofs muffled—with a revolver in each hand ringing out in deadly tones.

Confusion and terror seemed to seize the minds of the outlaws, whose horses were already plunging with affright so that they could not use their revolvers, and, panic-stricken, they fled down the canyon after Captain Rachel, leaving two of their number dead on the field.

Laramie Joe did not attempt to follow them but was satisfied with sending a few shots after them.

"Hurrah for Laramie Joe!" yelled Old Kit, when he realized that he was a free man once more; "hurrah for the veivet-footed kid o' the Laramie Plains!"

"And hurrah for Kit Bandy!" suddenly burst

from the lips of Old Rattler, who emerged from the bushes whence the first shot had come; "hurrah for the gigantic fraud o' the Plateau! the lily-lipped hummer o' the foot-hills! the royal, wild-eyed liar o' the West! Oh, by the great Rosycrusians! Bandy, I overheard your conversation with that veiled woman and your trying to palm your ugly self off for Old Rattler, the Chugwater gambolier; and I am prepared to vote you a heary-headed, sacrilegious deception."

"Say, you old ox-eyed daisy," interrupted Bandy, his face aglow with joy, "close that Mammoth Cave and let me introduce you to Laramie Joe, the young hurricane o' the Laramie Plains."

"Rosycrusians! that Laramie Joe? well, by snakes, Joe, I'm glad to press your palm," said Rattler, grasping the boy's hand in a grip that almost jerked him out of his saddle; "my name's Rattler—Old Tom Rattler."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Joe; "well, sir, I'm rejoined to meet you of whom I've often heard; but doesn't it strike you that our friend Bandy was in close quarters?"

"I should gargle that it did," responded Rattler, with a hearty laugh; "and if you could 'a' hearn the great old mountain detective's talk when he stood under liver o' that gal's revolver you'd 'a' had a fit. Fu'st he lied like a pirate and tried to pass his ugly self off for me, and then the soft, creamy love-stuff he lipped off to that gal made her gag."

"By the horn o' Joshua! if you'd 'a' seen that woman's eyes through her veil, you'd 'a' been broke up, too. I'll sw'ar they fairly fanged me—gored me to the heart like the horns o' a Texan steer. I'm no chicken-heart, Rattler. I've been—am—am not married, and my wife Sabina, was no chicken-heart—no house-plant—no doll for her husband to dandle, but she shot straight from the shoulder and dandled her husband; and that's why I'm here, Rat."

"But didn't this woman call you Paul, the Apostle?" asked Rattler.

"Yes, I s'pose she see'd I resembled that good old man o' the Bible—kind o' martyrish like."

"Yes, but she called you an assassin—a murderer, and that didn't sound much like Holy Writ. Old feller, I are d're'dful afeerd there's something smudgy al out you."

"You can't alers tell by a feller's lock, Rat, what he is. If sich war the case that mug o' yours'd not indicate a spotless, snow-ball character. But layin' metaphysics aside, Rattler, I must confess you fanged that outlaw in good shape and that squares up for that Injun I drapped for you last night."

"Are the Indians on the rampage, Kit?" asked Laramie Joe.

"Haydoogins o' 'em are ki-otin' 'round over the plateau."

"I am sorry to hear it," said the boy, thoughtfully.

"Lad, ye hav'n't heard what happened to Last Lick, have you?"

"Yes."

"From who?"

"Zulima Randall."

"Horn o' Joshua! where'd you see the gal?"

"I rescued her from an outlaw last night."

"And where's she now?"

"I left her in a grove far down the plain and came on in search of Sybil Bell whom Zulima informed me had also been carried away."

"Hurrah for you, boy! you're a wall-eyed screamer; but that war a rather tragic night in Last Lick."

"Why, did anything else happen besides the abduction of the two girls?"

"I should proclaimate there did. Major Bell was shot in the head, and I guess he'll kick over the traces—die."

"Who shot him?"

"Paul Postle, that old preacher."

A grim smile passed over the boy's face as he fixed a searching look upon the old detective's eyes. After a moment's silence, Bandy went on:

"And you haven't rescued Sybil, yit?"

"No," replied Joe: "I followed her trail, as I supposed, to the hills and to this point, but it seems I've been following the wrong trail."

"Why the wrong trail, lad?"

"Because I failed to find the abducted girl."

"Ah! there's where you're mistaken, Joseph."

"I don't understand you, Kit."

"Wal, I have discovered that all Last Lick has been most shamefully and robustly deceived; for I have discovered within the last half-hour that Sybil Bell, the charming, queenly darter o' Major Bob Bell, is that festive outlaw woman, Captain Rachel!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER AND THE DEAD MAZEPPA.

LET us now return and look after Zulima Randall, whom we left in the little motte on the plain under the starry sky.

After the maiden had offered up a fervent prayer, she sat down upon the couch prepared for her by her gallant young rescuer. She now had an opportunity for reflection, and the loneliness of her situation filled her heart with a despondency that she could not shake off. The face of her dead mother and that of her murdered father came up before her, and in her heart of hearts she wished that she was with them. The only ray of light that seemed shining through the gloom that surrounded her young life was a new-born hope that had sprung up within her breast since her meeting with Laramie Joe.

She was tired, nervous, and hungry, and her fears worked so like a gnawing canker upon her mind that the slightest sound became magnified into a dreadful noise. The chirp of a cricket seemed like the scream of a savage; the footfalls of ground-mice running around her were like the tramp of coyotes, and the sound of her horse cropping the grass, and the rustle of the foliage above her in a passing breeze, all conspired to distress her. Once she thought she heard a faint moan, and her thoughts at once reverted to the outlaw—her late captor—whom Laramie Joe had killed, lying on the plain so near. She listened with bated breath for a repetition of the sound, but all was quiet.

After a long mental struggle tired nature gave way and she laid down and fell asleep. She slept soundly—so soundly, in fact, that when she awoke it was broad daylight. The sun was high in the heavens. She started up, realizing at once that she had overslept herself, for she was to have started at sunrise for a place of safety in case Laramie Joe did not return; and he had not.

What bothered the maiden now, as one often is who in sickness or mental troubles falls asleep in the darkness and awakes in the daylight, was the time of day. She could not tell whether it was late in the morning or early in the evening. There was no dew on the grass and the sun was shining warm.

To satisfy her mind as to the points of the compass she cut a slender stick, and stepping out into the open plain she stuck one end of it in the ground. Then she watched the shadow of the stick and noted the course it moved. This test, taken in connection with the increasing space between the sun and the horizon, convinced her that it was morning.

So she made haste to depart for Deer Creek Ranch as directed by Laramie Joe. Catching her horse, which was grazing near, she bridled and saddled it, and then took up the lariat and secured it to the saddle. Then she went back into the grove to get her blankets, and while there she was startled with a genuine moan of human agony.

She drew back, the blood running cold in her veins. She gazed around her in terror, her brain growing dizzy. Her eyes fell upon an object that almost paralyzed her very heart. It was the wild, haggard face of a man lying in the bushes near, and she recognized the face as that of her late outlaw captor whom Laramie Joe had shot and, as he supposed, killed.

The maiden took a step backward and seemed on the eve of turning to flee.

"Zulima, for God's sake, don't leave me!" the wretched man gasped, with apparent great effort.

Zulima swallowed the great lump in her throat. She breathed somewhat easier, yet she could not speak nor could she remove her eyes from that ghastly face.

The wounded outlaw saw that she was dumb with terror, and to relieve her he said:

"Zulima, you need have no further fears of me. I am dyin'. I know I have wronged you, but I hope you will not desert me. That desperate boy's pistol has done the work for me. Oh, I'm dyin' in agony—don't leave me—I can't harm you, Zulima!"

"I can do you no good, I fear," the girl found use of her voice to reply.

"Only for my soul, Zulima," he moaned; "I want you to pray for me, for I've but a short time to live. Oh, I know it will be hard to pray for one that has wronged you as I have—but that wrong brings me here a dying penitent. I know you are a good Christian girl—I have heard you pray many times since we left Last Lick, and God seems to have answered your prayer. Oh, I know you will not refuse to pray for me—ask God's mercy for a soul that

is so soon to leave my burnin', achin' breast. Zulima, I was raised better. My poor old mother—"

Here the conscience-stricken man broke down. Zulima's woman-heart was touched with pity, instead of revolting with indignation and scorn. She forgot that the man was an outlaw and that he had endeavored to carry her away in captivity than which death would have been preferable. She thought of nothing but a trembling, penitent spirit hovering on the shores of eternity, asking a dying favor—begging a prayer—an appeal to the Great Master before whom it was so soon to appear in judgment.

Zulima advanced toward him. She saw that his clothes were incrustated and stiff with blood. The pallor of death was about his lips. His eyes wore that wild, glassy look, so evident of the presence of the grim monster.

"Can I not relieve your pain? bind up your wound?" asked the noble, forgiving girl.

"No, no," he replied, with a feeble shake of his head; "nothing nor no one on earth can help me, Zulima. And I do not want to die before my soul has been commended for mercy at God's throne—come nearer me, Zulima—don't fear me—I'm helpless as a child. Tell Laramie Joe I hold no grudge against him for this—he was right—I was wrong—I've been wrong for years. Oh, that I had life and strength to unburden my soul! I'd tell you all. How the past comes up before me—I have lived my life all over in the past two hours. My boyhood days, the old home, my parents, my brothers and sisters, my playmates, the old school-house and the old stone church—I've seen them all, Zulima. And once I thought I heard my mother's loving voice in prayer—praying for us all—praying that we'd all come to her by way of Calvary and Cross. But, Zulima, I am growin' weaker. Will you pray for me? I ask it as a dyin' favor."

With streaming eyes Zulima went down upon her knees.

The dying outlaw turned over on his side and rested his elbow on the ground and his head on his hand.

Zulima Randall was a devout Christian girl, and with all the fervor of her young heart she lifted her voice to Heaven in behalf of the dying outlaw. Long and fervently she prayed. Low and sweet was her voice. Her slender form swayed to and fro, and her white face uplifted toward Heaven wore the serenity of an angel.

When she had pronounced the last word and turned her streaming eyes upon the outlaw, she saw his head fall back, his jaws drop apart and his glassy eyes stare sightless toward heaven.

He was dead.

Zulima rose to her feet. A footstep sounded near. She turned quickly, and to her surprise and terror found herself confronted by a great, bearded, ruffianly-looking man, dressed in a half-savage garb, while from the bushes near appeared, like so many grinning demons, a dozen or more painted and plumed Indian warriors!

A cry burst from the maiden's lips and she started back.

A savage nimbly sprung forward and seized her by the arm, at the same time uttering a low, guttural ejaculation.

Zulima shrunk from his grasp, a shriek escaping her lips.

"Let go that gal's arm, Wolfheart!" commanded the white man, in a tone of authority. "And the Ingin that dares to harm a hair o' her head—to even touch her ag'in, 'll git his noggin' busted wide open. White Bear has spoken, and the pale-face squaw can go her way in peace."

"White Bear does not mean what he says," said a savage to the renegade chief.

"I do, red-skin," replied the chief; "the gal can go free."

"Oh, sir!" cried Zulima; "you are very kind!"

"I should hope the Lord'd strike me dead," the white chief said, "if I didn't have enough o' the honor o' civilization and manhood left in me to defend you after that prayer. I heard it, gal, from beginnin' to 'Amen.' That dead man there is an old, b'loved friend o' mine, and the woman that'd git down on her knees and pray for his soul deserves my protection. I'm no angel, gal, God knows, and the company I keep 'll tell you that; but I promise you that them red-skins sha'n't harm you as long as I can pull a trigger."

Zulima breathed a prayer of thanks. She saw now that her kindness of heart was bearing rich fruit—that her prayer for the dying had touch-

ed a chord in the breast of the renegade and aroused his honor and manhood which, perhaps, had laid dormant for years. But she saw that his words were received with ill-favor by his savage followers. A low grunt of disapproval passed from lip to lip, and a fierce, malignant scowl settled upon their faces. More than one hand had already sought the knife at its owner's girdle. Mutiny was threatened, but the chief himself was equal to the emergency, and grasping his revolver he again said:

"Miss, you can go now, and if you would find friends, go in yonder direction—ride fast, and you'll strike a creek finally which you must follow until you reach a cattle-ranch. And as you go, I hope you'll not forget that there is one white outcast and outlaw among the many in the great West that has a spark of honor and manhood left—who respects innocence and virtue."

"Oh, thank you, sir, I shall never forget you and your kindness and mercy!" Zulima said, and then she turned to depart.

A savage stepped in before her, saying:

"No, can't go."

"Warrior, stand aside and let that white squaw pass," commanded the chief, indignantly, emphatically.

The Indian looked at his superior with a treacherous scowl, then drew his knife.

"Go on, miss," the renegade said, "and if he interferes again it'll not be healthy for him."

Zulima turned and started around the Indian, but, quick as thought, the red-skin seized her by the arm, with a look of devilish malignance upon his face, and raised his knife to plunge it into her heart and thus settle the dispute; but the renegade was too quick for him—his pistol cracked and the murderous arm fell, shattered, at its owner's side.

A scream of pain burst from the red-skin's lips.

With a cry Zulima bounded away, and passing out of the grove she ran to her horse that was waiting near, and nimbly leaping into the saddle galloped away, never daring to glance back toward the grove through fear of her eyes meeting some horrid scene. She heard several pistol-shots follow each other in rapid succession as she rode away, and also savage yells that filled her breast with a vague fear for the safety of the man who had saved her life.

But free of all dangers for the time being, and mounted upon her horse that had been refreshed by a good feed of grass and rest, the maiden rode swiftly eastward, inwardly praying that her trials and suffering were near an end.

She rode forward for some time, and finally entered a little depression in the plain that kept deepening until it grew into a canyon with wooded bluffs on either side. A little stream of water meandered through the canyon, gathering strength as it advanced from springs along the way. At one of these springs Zulima finally dismounted, slaked her thirst, and then bathed her hands and face. She also watered her horse, then remounting continued on her way. She had ridden some distance, and had come to the happy conclusion that she was at last free from all dangers, but this proved a delusion, for suddenly she was startled by the clatter of hoofs in the canyon behind her.

Glancing back she saw a horse coming down the defile at a furious gait, his rider lying flat upon his back, and, seized with a new-born fear, the maiden lashed her pony to his utmost speed.

The way was smooth and unbroken by bush, stone or gully, though winding and tortuous, and the girl had hoped to outdistance her pursuer, as she believed the horseman to be; but she soon became convinced that he was gaining upon her. He came so close, in fact, that she could hear the panting of his horse, and presently she discovered that the animals were running side by side—neck and neck.

As her pursuer spoke not, Zulima ventured to look around, when a scene of horror met her gaze. A cry burst from her lips, and she was compelled to grasp her pony's mane to steady herself in the saddle.

Lashed to his horse's back with ropes, his face covered with crusted blood, and, to all appearances dead, was Laramie Joe, the Boy Knight of the Plain—was the sight that met her gaze and sent a convulsive shudder through her breast. Her very soul revolted at the awful sight, and she lashed her horse with all her strength in hopes of urging it away from the other, but despite her efforts, and that of her noble beast, the other horse kept close at her side with his silent rider—the lifeless Mazeppa on his back.

CHAPTER IX.
THE ROBBERS' CAMP.

In a deep, dark valley, under a cluster of pines in the Laramie Hills, ten men were encamped. They were rough, bearded, booted fellows, heavily armed. They were outlaws, as their appearances indicated. Their horses were tethered in the valley near camp, and one of their number stood guard.

It is night when we would look in upon this robber camp. Around a dim camp-fire the party is seated—some playing cards, some telling stories and singing ribald songs, and some conversing. And in course of the conversation, one of the latter remarks:

"I shouldn't be surprised if that Last Lick skeme o' Ralston's had miscarried."

"Why so, Red Bob?" asked a companion.

"Because, here two weeks have passed and nothin' heard from thar yit."

"Ha! ha!" laughed another, known as Hyena Jim, "Red Bob is gittin' anxious to see Captain Rachel. I alers thought Bob war in love with that gal."

"Call it what you want to, Hyena," replied Red Bob, "but I'm gittin' tired o' this inactivity; besides, I don't see what there can be in that Last Lick business that'd take a year or more to develop. Now, the general and Cap Rachel hev been at that minin'-camp ten months. They got rid o' Judge Randall easy, and the best o' their detectives hev failed to ferret out the matter. Now, what war they doin' to keep them thar all this time?"

"Waitin' for a chance to carry off the judge's darter."

"Thunder and Mars! I could 'a' rid in thar and toted her off six months ago—somethin' else the general's after."

"Yes; but the ginerel knows his business, and don't you disremember that. He's slow, but alers sure, and you know we all promised him to be patient till he got back."

"To be sure, Hyena," replied Bob, "and hav'n't we been?"

"Harkee!" suddenly exclaimed one of the band.

All listened and heard the sound of approaching hoofs.

"Some one's comin' sure as death," said Red Bob.

"Some o' our folks, I'll ante an eye."

"Who comes there?" the man on guard was heard to call out.

"My name is Sonora Steve; is this the camp o'—"

"All right, Sonora Steve, advance," the guard replied.

"News from Last Lick, or I'm a goat!" declared Hyena Jim. "Ho, Sonora Steve, old boy—glad to meet you, senior."

The little Mexican dismounted and shook hands with his old companions, in the mean time glancing inquiringly about camp.

"Glad to git back to the ranks, boys," the Mexican said, "but I see Captain Rachel hasn't arriv' yet."

"No, not yet."

"That's queer—she and her party left twenty-four hours before I did."

"Indeed? and did the ginerel's scheme work?"

"They got the girl, Zulima, but at fearful cost."

"You don't say so?"

"Yes, the ginerel got a bullet through his head, and 's goin' to die."

An exclamation of surprise and sorrow burst from the lips of the robbers.

"How on earth did that happen?" asked Red Bob.

"It's a long story and I'm tired and hungry," was Sonora's reply.

Acting upon this hint an outlaw took Steve's horse while another procured him some food. After he had eaten, and regaled himself on a drink of whisky, he began and narrated the story of the Frenchman's exhibition at the Pick-and-Shovel in Last Lick and the final shooting of Major Bell by the Rev. Paul Postle.

The outlaws were thunderstruck by this sad intelligence, for, as the reader has already inferred, Major Bell was the "General" Ralston Zandt of the outlaw band.

"Did you kill the cuss that shot the general?" asked Hyena Jim, furious with rage.

"Kill nothin'," replied Sonora Steve; "he skipped out right away, but it war developed that the preacher war a noted detective named Kit Bandy."

"The thunder you say!" exclaimed one, Kid Cole, "he's the wu'st old hellyon unhung. I've had to do 'ith him to the tune of three solid years in the State jug. But how does the gal, Cap'n Rachel, take the shootin' o' her dad?"

"She don't know it."

"Don't know it? how's that?"

"You see the gals war abducted while all the camp war at the Frenchman's show, and of course, Rachel war ten miles or more from camp afore Postle shot the ginerel; and I've follered up to break the news to her."

"By snakes, it'll kill her!" declared Red Bob, "for she worshiped her dad, and no mistake. Poor gal! I feel—"

"Hello-oh, down there!"

It was a sharp, shrill voice that came piercing through the night to the ears of the outlaw band, putting an end to their conversation and bringing every man to his feet.

"A woman's squawk or I never heard one!" declared Hyena Jim, and advancing a few paces in the direction whence the call came, he demanded:

"Who's there?"

"It's me, please gracious," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"Who's me, please gracious?" demanded Hyena.

"A poor, deserted female woman—Sabina Bandy," came from out the gloom.

"By gar!" exclaimed Kid Cole, "she said her name war Bandy—some relation o' Old Kit's, I reckon—his darter, maybe. Tell her to waltz in, Jim."

"Advance, Sabina Bandy, and accept the hospitality o' our camp, won't you?" asked Jim.

"Who are you? outlaws or hunters?" the woman questioned.

"Hunters," lied Hyena Jim.

"Git up, Pecos," the woman was heard to say to her horse, and the next moment she rode from the gloom into the light of the outlaws' camp-fire.

A broad grin overspread the bearded faces of the freebooters at sight of the woman and her horse; and one of them said in a low tone to Kid Cole:

"Must be Bandy's youngest darter, and I'd freeze ont her and make her my wife, if I war you, Kid."

The woman must have been fifty years of age, with a soured and wrinkled visage, a sharp, piercing eye, and a sunken mouth with thin, compressed lips. She was dressed in a coarse frock of dark material, a sun-bonnet that was battered and torn. Around her shoulders, was an old faded shawl pinned with a huge thorn at the throat.

The horse this woman rode showed that he not only carried a burden of years but was old himself, thin in flesh, and to all appearances well-jaded.

"Now here I be—good-evenin', gentlemen," the woman said, as she glanced over the crowd; "my name is Sabina Bandy, and I'm the lawfully wedded consort o' Kit Bandy, the—"

"Well, what are you doin' up here, Mrs. Bandy?" Red Bob asked.

"In search of my husband who deserted my bed and board without cause or provocation; and, please the Great Master, if I ever get eyes on that deestroyer of female happiness, that blighter of my girlish heart, I'll make him smoke."

"That's the way we are feelin' 'bout now, Mrs. Bandy," said Hyena Jim, "and we'd like to assist you in your work; but if you're in search of him you must know he's in these parts somewhere."

"The last I hearn of the heartless destroyer of female happiness he war up in these parts," replied Sabina, still keeping her seat in the saddle; "and if the truth's known perhaps some innocent, confidin' girl is the object of his rapacious heart, though I'm told he's passin' hisself off for a detective. A pretty detective he must be! I'd like to detect him once more and, please gracious, I'd break every bone in his body."

"If he's such an old heathen what do you want to hunt him up for?" asked Kid Cole.

"To torment him, to devil him, to harass him, to make his life as miserable as mine, to make him sup sorrow, to make sure he never 's clasped in other female arms than them," and she thrust out her long bony arms as if to clasp an imaginary being, while her eyes snapped like fire.

The outlaws could not suppress an outburst of laughter.

"Old gal, I've an ijee you'll make it tropical sure enough, for your lord and master if you could find him."

"Find him I will if I have to foller him to the end of the earth," the wronged wife said. "My woman's spirit has been 'roused, and I can tell you I'm no doll—no house-plant. For five years I've hounded that ongrateful man from post to

pillar, and as long as my lamp of life holds out to burn the darned old, 'fickle-hearted man-flirt shall breathe no love-words in another woman's ear as he did when he won my childish hand. Oh! it breaks my heart to think of the perfidy of that man!" and Mrs. Bandy began to sob and wring her hands while her body swayed to and fro like a reed in the wind.

"That's good as a monkey show," remarked one of the outlaws.

"Thar's so dashed much deception and hypocrisy in this 'ere great, big, wicked world," said Kid Cole, "that I'd as soon think that old woman's playin' some sharp—Hello! now, I wonder who's comin'?"

The last question was drawn out by the sound of more hoofs coming up the valley from the south.

In an instant the outlaws had their hands on their weapons.

Silence reigned for a few moments, then, as a man and woman suddenly emerged from the gloom, a shout burst from the lips of the band, and a rush was made toward the new-comers.

"Captain Rachel! Captain Rachel, the queen of the mountaineers, by the great Jehovah!" shouted Hyena Jim, excitedly.

The woman thus received by the outlaw band was Sybil Bell, the beautiful and queenly daughter of Major Robert Bell!

The outlaws seemed wild with delight, and, for the time being, all else was forgotten. The valley rung wild with their lusty shouts of joy, and it was several minutes before the excitement of the reception of the queen of the mountain outlaws had abated; but when it did, the band met with a surprise in the absence of Sabina Bandy.

The old woman had taken advantage of the outlaws' excitement over the arrival of the girl, and rode away into the darkness of the valley.

CHAPTER X.

A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

LARAMIE JOE was astounded by the declaration of Old Kit that Sybil Bell was the notorious female outlaw known as Captain Rachel. At first he could scarcely credit the story, but after some reflection, and the consideration of certain facts, he was forced to accept it as true; and upon these grounds he could readily understand how the trail of Sybil Bell had disappeared in the hills.

"Then she, too," the young knight said, "has been instrumental in the abduction of Zulima Randall."

"To be sure she has," replied Bandy, "but until I recognized her voice under her mask, sich a thing as Captain Rachel bein' Sybil Bell never entered my mind. But it seems they've all got onto my scheme, for they addressed me as Paul Postle; but, by the horn o' old Joshua! I don't care a continental! The mission o' Paul Postle has been accomplished, and now Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy'll finish up the job and polish it off."

"I begin to see, Bandy, that you are a lily-lipped hummer—a velvet-throated damsel," said Old Rattler; "but it hurts me to think o' the way you lied to that outlaw gal."

"I guess you'll live through it, Rattler," responded Kit, "for if I war huntin' for a George Washington truth-teller you are the last critter I know of I'd pick on. But as we have no business in these parts, boys, s'pose we lean off in some other direction—a healthier climate, for instance."

"All right, Kit," said Joe, "I would like to get back to where I left Miss Randall, though I hardly expect to find her there, for I told her to go on down to the Deer Creek Ranch if I were not back by sunrise."

Securing the dead outlaws' weapons and ammunition, they packed them on Joe's horse, then the trio started away toward the southwest.

In the course of a couple of hours they cleared the hills and entered the open plain across which lay their course.

Laramie Joe insisted on his two old friends taking turns with him in riding, and by this means they were enabled to make tolerably good time.

An hour or so after entering the plain, Laramie Joe discovered a number of vultures high in the air away to the north of them. They were slowly circling in the air, and seemed to be coming nearer and nearer.

"I don't like to see them," remarked the boy.

"No, they're not stars o' Bethlehem," admitted Old Kit.

Old Rattler, who was in the saddle, turned his head, and gazed across the plain. A cry burst from his lips.

"What d'ye see, Rat?"

"Hossmen! and they're comin' a-flukin', too!"

"The devils are after us, sure," exclaimed Bandy.

"Yes, boys," said Rattler, "we're goin' to have some stiff old fightin' to do, but then we're them as can do it."

"Laramie," said Old Kit, "jump yer hoss and line out and save that gal, Zulima."

"Yes, that's so, boy," added Rattler, leaping from the saddle, "go save the gal, and if we go under, you—"

"No, no, old friends," interrupted the boy, "I will never desert a friend in the face of danger. If there's going to be some fighting to do, I want a hand in it."

"But look here, boy, you and the gal are young, and there's a deal o' life before you yit," argued Old Rattler, "while me and that old Ruins o' Babylon there have 'bout rounded out our full measure o' years."

"That may all be, but my sense of duty will admit of no desertion of you," replied Joe; "I'd rather die an honorable boy than a conscience-stricken old man. No, I shall stay with you, for I can plainly see that you will need my help. There are Indians among those horsemen."

The approaching enemy could now be seen quite plainly, and, as near as possible, Old Kit made out about twenty in the party, the majority being savages. They were riding rapidly, a line of dust hanging on the air marking their trail back almost to the hills.

"We've got big odds to fight, boys," the detective said, "and here in the open plain it's goin' to hustle us to kill 'em all afore they git in some work. I hate arfully to deestroy so many people that might be useful to society."

"Bandy, you're a hull Quaker-meetin'-house full o' Christianity—a rooral deestrect of simplicity, a female seminary o' tender-heartedness," said Old Rattler; "you'd ought to 'a' been a detective in the land o' love instead o' the hills and prairies."

"Let us hurry forward to yonder eminence, folks," said Laramie Joe; "there's a spring there where we can get water, and besides we can command the approach on all sides to a better advantage."

"A good idea, lad," replied Rattler, "for we'll need some advantage, sure sartain."

The three hurried forward and took their position on the eminence and got their rifles and revolvers, including those taken from the outlaws, in readiness for the struggle.

By this time the oncoming foe were within half a mile of them, and as the trio gazed upon the flying horde, a look of desperate determination settled upon their features. To the two old men Laramie Joe looked heroic in his unwavering, resolute courage, and his calm, manly demeanor.

To one unacquainted with the skill, courage and fighting qualities of those three whites, an attempt to repel that horde of infuriated savages and outlaws would seem like criminal folly, and could have but one outcome, and that certain death to the three.

But the idea of surrendering to their enemies never once entered the minds of the whites. They knew it was victory or death. They calmly awaited the approach of the foe, never moving until they were within two hundred yards. Then Laramie Joe dropped upon one knee, and resting his elbow on the other, leveled his carbine on the foremost of the foe—a red-skin—and fired.

The boy had measured the intervening distance with the eye, but the distance was longer than he had calculated upon, and the bullet fell short of the mark, but it was not without effect, for the savage's flying horse was shot through the brain and the red-skin flung heels over head to the earth.

A shout of triumph burst from the lips of Bandy and Rattler, and was answered by a defiant war-whoop from the foe.

"By the horn o' old Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy, "you fanged that feller, Laramie, sure!"

"No—only his hoss," said Rattler; "but try another shot the same elevation and you'll get a red-rind."

The enemy had come to a stop in some confusion. The unhorsed red-skin was evidently the chief of the party, and taking advantage of their halt, Laramie Joe sent a second bullet down among them with the effect of killing a savage and wounding an outlaw.

"Whoop! that fetched a persimmon, boy!" shouted Rattler; "that shot war a compound dazzler, and I guess I'll see if I can't pluck a dewberry, too."

Quickly the unhorsed chief sprang to his feet,

and seizing the reins of the dead savage's horse, vaulted upon its back and again led the charge up the knoll toward the three intrepid plainsmen.

Never moving from his kneeling position, Laramie Joe took careful aim and again brought down the chief's horse, which accident again threw the savages into confusion; but this lasted only for a few moments. The foe realized that they were now within easy range of the three deadly rifleman, and to dally was to court sure death, so, with one accord and without their chief, they thundered on up the knoll yelling like demons possessed.

"Crack! crack! crack!" went the plainsmen's rifles, and at every discharge a savage or outlaw tumbled to the earth or swung out of the ranks to the right or left seriously wounded. The deadly repeating carbine of the Boy Knight and the breech-loaders of the old hunter and detective, enabled them to keep up a hot fire in the face of the enemy, nearly every shot taking effect on man or horse.

But inspired, no doubt, by their superior numbers, the savages displayed unusual courage and pressed on, determined upon the death of the dread young Pantherfoot, whom they had never had at such an apparent advantage before.

As soon as they were within pistol-shot the three whites dropped their rifles and took up their revolvers.

With yells of defiance the savages began throwing their tomahawks and the outlaws to discharge their revolvers.

Fast and deadly flashed the weapons of the brave trio almost in the very face of the foe.

Up to within twenty feet of them charged the warriors, and then, when it seemed but another step to victory, a wounded outlaw turned aside with a cry of agony, and his words and actions struck terror to the hearts of his friends, and like panic-stricken sheep they turned and fled in the wildest disorder and fear. But as they turned, an outlaw, with a muttered curse, fired his revolver at the three brave victors. A gasp burst from Laramie Joe's lips. He staggered forward, clutching his brow, and fell limp and lifeless to the earth!

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Old Kit, "in the midst of victory there is defeat. The poor, brave boy has been slain!"

"Great Rosycrusians! I hope not!" cried Old Rattler, hurrying to the side of the prostrate form of the youth.

Joe had fallen forward on his face. Rattler turned him over on his side. A groan escaped the old man's lips. The handsome, boyish face was all covered with blood. There was a death-pallor around his mouth.

"Yes, Bandy, he's gone," said the hunter, feeling the lad's pulse; "it's all over with the Boy Knight. Laramie Joe's dead!"

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN RACHEL'S ARRIVAL ON THE FIELD.

FOR a few moments Kit and Rattler stood and gazed upon the motionless form of Laramie Joe, a look of sadness upon their faces.

"Yes, the career o' the Boy Knight's ended," Bandy said seriously, sorrowfully. "And it'll so be with us, too, afore long, for them varmints have drawn rein and are preparing to give us another charge. They've seen that our best man's down and will return with renewed hopes. But then, if I'm to die, die it is; nor do I keer what they do with my old carcass arter the spirit's gone, but I don't want them to mutilate this boy's, nor they sha'n't if I can help. Let us bind his body on his hoss and turn the animal loose. Them devils have got nothin' that can catch it."

"Anything, old pard, anything," answered Rattler.

So the horse that had been picketed near before the fight began was unfastened and the saddle removed. Then the body of the young knight was tenderly lifted and placed on the animal's back and securely bound there with the lariat. This done, the animal, already frantic with affright, its strange burden and the scent of blood, was turned loose, and it at once dashed down the knoll and away across the plain with its voiceless rider.

The old plainsmen watched the animal for a few moments, then Kit turned away, saying sadly:

"Pity it couldn't 'a' been me, Rattler, for I'm gittin' old and wouldn't been missed by a soul on earth. This is a queer old world, pard, and full o' queer things, but to God all is plain enough, and when He wills it we will foller the boy."

"It begins to look as though our time'd come,

Kit," observed Rattler, wiping the perspiration from his brow.

"Yes, it does; but I've been in as close a fix haydoogins o' times and allers pulled through some way. In the thirty years of active service on the prairies and in the hills, among the wu'st men and dangers, savages and wild beasts, I've encountered hundreds o' scrapes like his and concluded the jig war up with Kit Bandy. Scores and haydoogins o' villains have I brought to justice and to judgment, and did I not know the eend justified the means, I expect I'd died long ago with remorse for the deception, the wholesale hypocrisy, lyin', cheatin' and rascality I practiced in order to circumvent crime and its votaries. But a detective has to resort to these things."

"I ruther think it comes nateral, Bandy, for they say it takes a rogue to catch a rogue."

"If that be true, Rat, you'd surely make a good rogue-catcher," responded Bandy, with a grim smile.

And thus the two old plainsmen converged and badgered each other until they saw three horsemen—outlaws—leave the party on the plain and start away in pursuit of the Boy Knight's horse.

"Ha! the devils 'll never catch that hoss," said Kit, grimly.

"Nor will there be another charge on us till them three fellers git back, I reckon. But that's all the better for us. We can git our persimmon-pickers in good shape."

Carefully the old men reloaded their guns and revolvers, then they slaked their thirst and bathed their brows at the little spring whose waters boiled from the side of the knoll and crept away through the grass and disappeared in the plain below.

In the pouch on Laramie Joe's saddle they found some dried venison, which they divided and ate with a keen relish, for they had no breakfast that day.

Suddenly, Bandy, whose eyes were ever on the watch, pointed across the plain far beyond the foe in the valley, and said:

"Thar comes another horseman, Rattler."

"Yes, and by the Rosycrusians! it's a woman! It must be Captain Rachel, the lady to whom you tumbled so gracefully this mornin'."

"And it might be my wife, Sabina, for she are abroad in the land, Rattler, and ruther 'n encounter her, give me a hull brigade o' redskins—a rigemint o' outlaws."

"And even if it's that Captain Rachel, and she's got her ire up 'bout that affair this mornin', and then gits it up still higher when she sees them karkidges along down this hillside, she'll make it bilious for we old pilgrims. I'll bet her blood's so hot now the hair on her head's linkin'."

At a lively speed the woman approached, and long before she reached her friend's Kit and Rattler saw that it was the female outlaw, Captain Rachel, sure enough.

She was received by her friends without any apparent demonstration. Evidently they were not in a spirit for enthusiasm at that time. Too many of their friends lay stretched along the hillside and writhing in agony around them for rejoicing.

The woman conversed with her allies for nearly an hour, never for a moment quitting her saddle. Finally she turned and rode at a walk toward Kit and Rattler, her friends remaining behind, some in the saddle, some on the ground.

"By the horn o' old Joshua! she's comin' up here, Rat!" exclaimed Bandy; "what d'ye s'pose 's in the wind now?"

"Deviltry o' a kind you and me are not up to, Kitsie, I'm afeard. She may be figgerin' on our havin' too much robust manhood to strike a woman, and intends to take the advantage of her sex to slip a chunk o' lead through our anatomies. And then, Kit, it may be a mission o' love."

"Well, we'll have to watch her closely," said Kit.

"Hullo! see thar, Kitsie Band, she waves a handkerchief—flings to the breeze a flag o' truce! Do you know what that means, you old god-dess?—understand that, you old buccaneer?"

"Means she wants a conference, I reckon."

"Ha, I believe she's in love with you, is that Queen Cleopatra and she's anxious to speak to her Marc Antony?"

"I rather think she'd prefer sendin' a bullet through my heart instead o' a Cupid's dart. No, no, Rattler, you need not feel envious—that gal's not dyin' of affection for me. She's no reason to; on the contrary, she's reason, if not a just one, to use all the deception and treachery o' her wicked heart to kill me. But I may be

mistaken in her motives in comin' up here; howsomever, we must watch her every movement, Rattler, for she's liable to fang us quicker'n a lightnin'-geared rattlesnake, and when she does strike it'll be to kill."

CHAPTER XII.

THE INTERVIEW WITH CAPTAIN RACHEL.

IN recognition of the young female outlaw's flag of truce old Kit Bandy put his cap on the muzzle of his gun and waved it above his head as a counter flag. This seemed to satisfy the girl that she would be received in a conference, and she touched up her horse and approached at a canter, finally drawing rein before the old plainsmen.

The horse she rode was not the same one she had in the morning, but a large and splendid animal with arched neck and clean limbs.

The face of the beautiful outlaw wore a mingled expression of disappointment and sorrow. Her eyes burned with a strange, subdued light. She seemed worn in body and mind, and when she drew rein she sprung to the ground, and with a nervous, restless start looked up into Bandy's face, and then said, in a voice that was not at all the clear, musical voice of Sybil Bell:

"Kit Bandy, I want you to know who I am; you escaped me this morning before I had time to introduce myself."

"Thank you, Miss Sybil, but I recognized your voice the moment you spoke," replied Kit, politely.

"Then, I presume, you are here to arrest me?" the woman said, in a tone slightly tinged with sarcasm.

"Not at all, Miss Sybil," replied Kit; "on the contrary, our retreat has been arrested here by your followers."

"You deserve to die, Kit Bandy—you shot my father," she said, half choking with a deep sigh.

"I'm sorry that it was necessary to do so, Miss Sybil, but you know why I did it, I'm sure," the detective responded.

"You played a shrewd game as a detective, but you do not know yet whether you have unraveled the secret of Judge Randall's murder," she declared in a self-confident tone.

"A little more time 'll tell, Miss Sybil, and yet there are no doubts in my mind, nor is there in yours."

"I never knew my father had been shot until last night," she said, biting her lip to keep back the grief that seemed struggling upward in her breast, while tears gathered in her eyes.

"I am truly sorry for you, Miss Sybil, I swear to God I be, for I see you are feelin' bad," said Old Kit, his voice deep with emotion; "and I admit when I fired that shot in the Pick-and-Shovel that night, I never dreamed of you bein' Captain Rachel, the outlaw. In fact, I had only suspected your father of bein' the murderer of Judge Randall, and—"

"And brought that French artist there to help develop what never could have been done otherwise," the woman broke in.

"You are endowed with woman's wits, gal, I confess," Bandy replied; "but, as I remarked before, I never suspected you and your father being connected with the outlaws."

"Nor did we ever dream of Rev. Paul Postle being old Kit Bandy, or he would have met the fate of Judge Randall. But this is not what I came here for: a messenger arrived from Last Lick this morning, bringing me the news that my father was still alive, but dying from the effects of your shot. He wants to see me, but I dare not return there—"

"Yes you dare, girl; if I had my say-so 'bout it, you should go right to him and leave unmolested, even though you be Captain Rachel."

"That is a generous offer, but I could not accept it—I will never go back to that accursed camp of my own free will—no, never!" and she gave emphasis to her word by a stamp of her foot.

"Well, that's all I could do, even if I'd liberty to do that."

"There is a favor you can do me, if you will," she said.

"What is it?"

"Carry a message to my father for me."

"Miss Sybil, I will agree to do so, providin' I git out o' this place with my life; though I must confess that things are in a mixed state—rather peculiar that you should ask me to do you a favor, and yet at the same time your followers are right at my heels seekin' my life."

"In consideration of the favor I ask," said Sybil, "I will give you this horse upon which to escape, though really I ought to kill you dead instead of helping you."

"Miss Sybil, as a detective, I have no apolo-

gies to make for what I do, nor am I askin' any mercy at your hands. I am willin'—yea, ready to take my chances with my old pard here in lickin' thunder out o' your folks, and yet if I git through all right I'll deliver your message to your dyin' father. I hold no grudge ag'inst you, understand, gal, nor your father. As Captain Rachel, I presume you can command—"

"That name, sir," she broke in, "is simply honorary—I never led the men in a single raid on a stage or settler. This is true, I care not what you have heard to the contrary. It is true, the men, wild, rough and wicked though they be, have shown me every kindness and respect that any woman could ask; but I have not even the power to prevent them killing you if they can, and they are sure to attack you soon. They know that Laramie Joe is dead, and they are now simply waiting the coming of a party of twenty more Indians over in the hills when the fight on you will be renewed. Even if I could persuade the road-agents to let you go unmolested, the Indians would not. So I say to you in all candor, there is but one chance for you, and that is the one I offer."

"And but for the favor you seek through our escape you'd fang us—help kill us," said Kit.

"Very likely," was her frank response, given with a sardonic smile.

"But will the red-skins not punish you if you help us away?" questioned Rattler.

"I have no fears of them—none at all."

"But if your father dies, what'll you do, gal? Surely not stay with the outlaws?"

"I'll take care of myself, nor will I stay with the outlaws. Here is the note to my father. I wrote it just before I came up here. Those mountaineers and red-skins do not know what I am here for, and they will doubtless pursue you, but that horse is strong and fleet. He will carry you both out of danger. He was the favorite horse of my father; but do you hesitate to accept these terms because I am a woman?"

"Not at all, Miss Sybil; there's as much or more in your act for you than for us, else you'd never be so generous."

"You speak very truthfully, Kit Bandy; I would rather kill you than permit you to go free, and would did I not believe you would keep your promise with me."

"Yes, I'll keep my word with a woman—"

"Then mount and flee—let us say no more," she exclaimed; then turning she walked away in the direction of her friends.

"Wal, by the ram's horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, as he glanced first at the retreating girl, then at Old Rattler, "if this don't git away with anything I ever encountered!"

"It are a leetle numerous," averred Rattler, "like the ingredients in Inglin hash; but, by the great goblins! if that woman ain't a wheezer, a hily-lipped hummer, Satan's a swine. Man alive! but her fingers did burn—I see'd the ends smoke—to shoot the everlastin' enjoyments outen you, Kit. Oh! but she's a honey-puddle, a nest o' yaller-jackets."

"Well, what d'ye say, Rat? Shall we mount that steed and skip?"

"Guess we'd better, Kit, for, by the great Rosycrusians! yander comes that band o' red-rinds, and if we stay here they'll make it epidemickly 'ill-firish for us."

"Then hand up the guns to me when I git on," said Old Kit, and he swung himself up into the saddle; "there now, give me your hand, old boy, and step onto my foot and make a spring—that's it, now here we go!"

"Yes, and thar comes our deestroyers, too," said Rattler.

"Let 'em come," said Kit, as they went flying down the little knoll like the wind, "and if they catch us, we can fight one place as well as another."

The sight presented by the two old fugitives was as ludicrous and comical as it was exciting, and they fully realized the fact from the start, themselves. With a readiness, so characteristic of the borderman, and that, too, in the face of most deadly danger, they took the humorous side of the situation and appeared to enjoy it.

"I say, Bandy," Rattler observed, as they sped along. "I know thar's a splendid sight goin' to waste just now, and that's we too old twin babboons on this 'ere hoss."

"Yes I reckon we present a splendid pair o' figgers on hossback, and I'll bet that gal's laughin' till she fangs herself."

"It would be a loud joke on you, Bandy, if this war jist a slippery little trick o' her to git we old Mathusilanians from that knob. Isn't it a good, robust, rosy-cheeked joke, anyhow, to go abroad, that Old Karistopher Kolumbuss Bandy, the great mountain detective, and Old

Tom Rattler, the wild, untamed tempest, and Red River Epidemic, had to accept terms from an outlaw gal—also a hoss, and shin out like a pair o' wild-eyed gamboliers? Speak out, Bandy, and let the winds carry your sad words along the mountains and over the plains till it—"

"Say, ole man, ar'n't ye afeard the sun'll blister yer lungs, talkin' so much?" asked Bandy, with a smile illuminating his face; s'pose ye blockade that gap in yer head."

"I never git tired o' tellin' the Book-o'-Revelations truth, Kit; but say, old chum, glance back over your brawny shoulders and tell me if ye don't think them red-rinds and their friends ar'n't gainin' upon us."

Old Kit glanced back, and as he did so, suddenly exclaimed:

"By the horn o' Joshua! they are gainin' on us, 'less the distance are longer'n it seems."

"Think they're gainin' a bit, Kit; but then it will be a long time yit before they overhaul us, 'less this steed breaks down. Blame that gal, an old fool man can be led around by her like a bull with a ring into its nose. I'll bet if you git away safe this time that in less'n a week you'll be lungin' across the plain like a wild antelope, or plugin' throu' h the hills like a mad Texan steer, a-huntin' for that gal to fling love stuff at her. You can't foolish me on an old rat like you, Bandy."

"I s'pose you've larnt something by a century o' experience, Rattler, even if a tongue is all you've got in your head," retorted Kit; "but say, pard, I've a notion to swing off gradually to the left and plunge in among them hills and brakes yander."

"You're the captain o' this park, Kitsie, and I go whither you sail. Make for any port you wish, for I'm only out on a pleasure excursion for my health."

Kit bore slightly to the left, and in the course of some two hours they entered the head of a canyon trending away toward the southeast.

While we have been but a short time writing of the events that transpired after the first meeting of Kit Bandy and Captain Rachel in the early morn, it is nevertheless true that their enactment ran through the entire day, so that when the two old fugitives entered the canyon it was just sunset.

At this time there was no doubt of the fact that the foe were gaining upon the fugitives, and that rapidly, too. Scarcely eighty rds separated them. The old bordermen's horse was fast failing under his double burden and long, unbroken race across the hot, dry plain. He had done nobly under the circumstances, but he had not the endurance of the mustangs ridden by the pursuers.

However, the fugitives felt certain that he would hold out a few minutes longer, when they could safely take to the shadows of night among the hills and bluffs that grew deeper and darker as they advanced. But in this they were doomed to a bitter disappointment. Their horse suddenly stumbled, staggered, and with a convulsive lunge fell dead.

Old Rattler was pitched headlong to the earth, but in an instant he was upon his feet, to find his companion held fast upon the ground by the body of the horse lying upon his leg.

"Great goblins! Kit, are you hurt?" the old man exclaimed.

"No, Rat, but I'm in a vise, sure'n death," replied Bandy.

Rattler endeavored to release his friend, but his strength was not adequate to the task.

"Oh, I'm elected, Rattler," Bandy said, with an air of calm resignation; "you'd better line out, old pard, and save yerself while ye ken."

"Bandy, I'm not that kind o' man," replied Rattler, with a resolute determination written upon his bearded face; "if you are to die, I'll die with you, but I'll paint the sky red before I go under—here the red-rind demons come, and I'll go to swatin' 'em!"

He took up his rifle and sent a bullet crashing through the body of a savage, but they were closer than he had supposed, and before he could repeat the shot the foe was upon them like so many maddened devils.

With his clubbed gun the old man fought like a fury until he was overcome by sheer force and made prisoner.

With Bandy they had little trouble, and removing the dead horse from his leg, his hands were bound, and then he and Rattler both were subjected to many cruel indignities by the pack of red and white demons, whose yells, shouts and curses of vengeance made the canyon ring with an infernal din.

The victorious pursuers now held a short consultation as to their course for the evening. As darkness was upon them then, and their ponies

about fagged out, they concluded to stop in the canyon for the night, during which time they could decide on what disposition they would make of the captives.

Not far away, at the foot of the bluffs in the canyon, was an old sod house that had once been the headquarters of a party of buffalo-hunters. Although it had been deserted for years, it was in a fair state of preservation—probably because fire would not destroy it—and its presence there among the trees and bushes being known to Hyena Jim, that worthy led the way to the building after a party had been detailed to take care of their horses and see that they were lariatied out to grass.

Reaching the old sod house the party with the prisoners entered, when Kid Cole, the outlaw, proceeded to strike a fire in the center of the hut, an abundance of dry twigs and limbs suitable for the purpose being found near the door outside.

And as soon as the place had been relieved of its gloom an outlaw advanced, and looking Kit Bandy in the face, asked:

"Reverend Pau! Postle—Mr. Detective Bandy—do you recognize me?"

"Yes, you are that imp of hell—Sonora Steve, that I had the sublime pleasure o' liftin' over Luke Freiner's bar on the toe o' my boot," was the frank, defiant reply of Old Kit.

"And I am to have the pleasure of knifin' you," the fellow replied, his little snakish eyes glittering like beads of fire, while a devilish, Satanic grin swept over his ugly face.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OUTLAWS' PISTOL PRACTICE ON KIT AND RATTLER.

KIT BANDY expected every moment to feel a steel blade driven into his body by the hand of the cowardly little Mexican, Sonora Steve, and perhaps such would have been his fate had Hyena Jim, who seemed to act with authority, not ordered the Mexican to put up his knife and keep cool till all could take a hand in Bandy's execution.

The enemy numbered in all about twenty persons, eight of whom were outlaws. The savages were an atrocious-looking crew, and seemed half-crazed with frenzy, and for awhile it required considerable effort on the part of the outlaws to prevent them from tomahawking the captives.

The prisoners' pockets were carefully searched, and everything loose about them appropriated. Hyena Jim found on Bandy's person the note given him by Captain Rachel. He opened it and read it. A contemptuous smile passed over his face.

"I'm sorry to disappoint the young lady," he said, with a sneer, "but you, old man, will not be permitted to deliver this note. That girl played us a scurvy trick to-day in fittin' you out with the best hoss in Wyoming, and the first thing she knows she'll find her commission revoked. I've alers said a woman in a band of mountaineers was a nuisance."

"Mountain devils! you'd better say," exclaimed Old Rattler.

"Have it as you please, old man," replied Hyena Jim; "but say, which of you old festers is Kit Bandy?"

"I've the honor of bein' that lark," promptly spoke up Old Kit.

"It'd be better for you if you had not that honor," put in Kid Cole, "for our folks have put a price on your head."

"Do your worst, thugs, for I can die game," retorted Kit. "I've had haydoogins o' fun saltin' down sich critters as you—I've filled one hull corner in purgatory with mountaineers."

"Very well, Kit Bandy; blow and bluster now will avail you nothin', even if you be the trusted messenger o' our gal capt'in. But don't let this note worry you; I'll agree to deliver it myself. Nobody in Last Lick will know but I'm the governor o' the territory when I go down thar."

"The brand on your forehead 'll give you dead away," remarked Old Rattler, "for hell's full and b'ilin' over with sich branded cattle as you be."

"Say, where do you s'pect to meet that boy, Laramie Joe, that got his last sickness this mornin'—bove or below?" chimed in Sonora Steve, who could not be kept in the back-ground.

"Bark, ki-yote!" retorted Rattler.

"By smoke! they're gamey terrapins!" declared an outlaw. "Can't we contrive some way to take the snappishness outen them?"

"Yes," replied Kid Cole; "s'pose we pin 'em up ag'inst that wall and chaw their ears and hair off with bullets—have some pistol-practice.

What's the use standin' 'round here frin' cheap talk at sich old hardshells as they be?"

"All right; if some one'll get half a dozen forked sticks, I'll show you how to tack 'em to the wall," said Hyena Jim.

Borrowing a couple of tomahawks of the Indians, two outlaws went out in search of the sticks requested. In a short time they returned with them. The prongs of the forks were sharpened, then the captives were crowded against the wall, standing. A fork was then placed astride of each one's neck and driven into the sod wall until the crotch fitted snug against the throat, but not tight enough to choke. Other forks were then placed over their ankles thus virtually pinning them fast to the wall, sure enough. Their hands were tightly bound at their backs, and altogether they were pretty well secured.

One of the savages, impatient to put the old captives to the torture, took up a bundle of pine sticks, and setting them ablaze swung the hissing brand to and fro apast the old men's faces, singeing their hair and whiskers. But not a word significant of fear or pain escaped the captives' lips, and so this mode of punishment became monotonous to the savages and the outlaws, and finally Hyena Jim said:

"Oh, stop that hair-barberin' and let's trim up ears awhile. Them souses o' Kit Bandy's are too big for the man, anyhow, and we want to see him trigged up afore he goes over the river—stand back there, boys."

The crowd fell back to the opposite end of the long room, when Hyena Jim raised his revolver, and taking deliberate aim at Bandy's head, fired.

A cloud of dust and dirt puffed from the dry sod wall at the side of the old border detective's head.

A yell burst from the lips of the savages.

Hyena Jim was a noted pistol-shot, and on examination it was found that his bullet had buried itself in the wall within a hair's breadth, as it were, of Old Kit's head.

"Me throw scalp-knife now," said a red-skin, and stepping back he took a long, sharp knife by the tip of the blade and flung it at the head of Old Rattler, driving it into the wall so close that the hunter felt the wind of the weapon.

A shout of applause burst from the lips of the crowd.

Another savage grasped his knife-point and endeavored to display his skill, but being a tall man, the haft of the knife, as his arm swung forward over his shoulder, struck the low roof of the house and drove the blade through his hand, severing muscles and tendons, and forcing a cry of the keenest agony from the unlucky performer's lips.

For a moment the sport was interrupted by this accident, and before it could be renewed, in fact, the presence of a new-comer was announced by a sharp, piercing shriek at the door, and an old woman, carrying an umbrella which she brandished above her bonneted head, bounded into the room and sweeping down to where Bandy stood, turned and facing the crowd of astounded savages and outlaws, screamed out, in wild, fierce tones:

"Inhuman monsters! stand back! That man is my husband, ungrateful deserter tho' he be! I have sought him from the ends of the earth, and now proclaim in the voice of injured innocence that I'm his lawfully wedded wife, Sabina Bandy, and, please gracious, I'll defend my rights with my life!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PALE HORSEMAN.

FOR a minute or so the outlaws and savages were somewhat surprised and confused by the appearance of Sabina Bandy upon the scene of action.

"That blamed old woman ag'in!" snarled Red Rob, the outlaw.

"Oh, Lord, Rattler!" groaned Old Kit, as though the presence of his self-confessed spouse had added new terrors to his situation. "I'm a goner now, old pard."

Sonora Steve darted from the crowd toward the old woman and made an attempt to seize her by the arm, but the woman eluded him and at the same time brought her old umbrella down upon the head of the Mexican with a rattling crash. The blow was so stunning that the outlaw was brought to his knees, and the malediction that escaped his lips was drowned in the derisive laugh of his friends.

"Lay yer vile hand on me—Sabina Bandy—will ye, ye vile wretch?" the old woman fairly hissed, fixing her flashing eyes on the outlaw;

"touch me and I'll maul the liver-pins out o' you! Please gracious, I'm a woman of courage, and now that I've found my heartless husband after years of search I'll not be cheated outen him!"

And turning, she snatched the forked sticks from over his neck and limbs and flung them at the foe, then with a sweep or two of her knife severed her husband's bonds.

"Hold on there, old lady," said Hyena Jim; "you're carryin' this thing a leetle too fur. S'nora Steve, guard the door thar, so that old pilgrim can't give us the dodge, and we'll halter him up ag'in, and expel his wife, who'll be better off without him if he's as villainous as she claims."

Sonora Steve advanced and took up his position in the door, his knife clutched in his fingers. As he did so, a sound behind him arrested his attention, but before he could turn something struck him in the back and knocked him half across the room. At the same instant a horse—a pony, with a rider lying upon its back—bounded into the room with a fierce snort and glowing eyes, and knocking over three or four savages in its mad lunge.

And as soon as the animal had passed through the door the rider rose to a sitting posture, a revolver in each hand, and opened a deadly fire on the outlaws and savages; and close at the heels of the pony followed eight men dressed in the garb of rancheros, each with a revolver in hand.

Taken by surprise, the savages and outlaws started back terror-stricken, before the murderous crash and blaze of the rancheros' revolvers.

Once Hyena Jim endeavored to rally his followers and engage the foe, but his daring life was cut short by a bullet crashing through his brain.

With her characteristic comlativeness old Sabina Bandy dropped her umbrella, threw back her bonnet from her head and drawing a little "twenty-two" revolver, opened on the foe, giving utterance to a wild, hysterical scream at every discharge of the weapon.

The panic-stricken foe, cut off from the door, made a rush for the open window on the opposite side—crowding, cursing and yelling—trampling beneath their fee their dead and wounded comrades in their mad endeavors to escape. Fully half their entire force fell within the hut, and those that did escape were at once hotly pursued into the night by all the victorious rancheros except the one on the horse.

At the beginning of the conflict Old Kit Bandy sprang to the side of his friend Rattler and quickly jerked the crotched sticks from his neck and limbs, and then releasing his bonds, turned to take a hand in the conflict. Just then he caught the first fair view of the face of the ranchero on the horse, and he started back with surprise written on his features.

The head of the horseman was tied up in a scarlet bandage, and from his face, that was almost ghastly in its paleness, shone a pair of eyes that fairly glowed in their unnatural brightness.

"My God, Rattler!" cried Old Kit, his looks betraying the deepest emotion, that horseman is Laramie Joe, the Boy Knight, or his spirit!"

"It can't be, Bandy—" began Old Rattler, but he was here interrupted by the horseman, leaping to the ground and extending his two hands, saying:

"So we meet this side of eternity again, old pards."

It was Laramie Joe in flesh and spirit!

But not until the old plainsmen had felt the warm clasp of his hand could they fully believe the evidence of their own eyes. Then they turned and looked into each other's face in contemptuous silence. Bandy was the first to speak.

"I'll be fanged!" was his remark.

"You and another old, old fool I know ought to be shot," was Rattler's rejoinder.

Another silence followed that was broken by Laramie Joe who burst into a peal of laughter.

"I see you folks are somewhat confused by my presence here," the boy said.

"Confused? well, by the horn o' Joshua! that don't express it, boy," replied Bandy in apparent disgust. "The ki-yotish countenance of that old buccaneer of the prairie, there," pointing to Rattler, "expresses my feelin's better'n words could."

"And I, your wronged companion, Christopher C. Bandy," exclaimed old Sabina, coming to the front, "can express the heartlessness of your heart in a few words, and I—"

"Don't, Mrs. Bandy," interrupted Kit with meek politeness, "there is no time now to settle

our affairs. Just wait till we're alone, and like a Christian martyr I'll bow down and receive your—your blessing."

"Very well, very well," Sabina said, and turning, she walked out of the cabin, to the apparent relief of Old Kit, who, turning to Laramie Joe, asked:

"How does it come, Joseph, that you're here alive? The last time we looked upon you to-day on the plain, you were dead—n the mother o' Adam."

"I don't know myself, friends, all about to-day's doings," the pale youth answered, but I suppose you can throw some light on the darker part of it. I remember our being in a red-hot fight on the plain with the Indians and outlaws, and then there seemed to have been an end to my career for a while, for the next thing of which I was cognizant was of lying upon a couch in a house with a terrible pain in my head. When I had fully recovered my senses and recognized those around me as my rancher friends, and recalled the incident of the fight on the plain, felt the bandage on my head, I was not long in making up my mind that there was a blank in my life—a skip of an hour, or a day or week, as the case might be.

"Upon inquiry I learned that I had been carried there in an unconscious state, tied to the back of my horse. The time was about two o'clock in the afternoon when I was released, so that I concluded I must have been carried around by my horse some five hours—that is, if my ride dated from the last recollection I had of the fight on the plain up to my rescue."

"Do you hear that, Kit Bandy?" asked Old Rattler with a look of contempt; "do you hear that, great Rocky Mountain detective? Does your old grandmotherly brain begin to grasp hold o' the truth with the grizzly b'ar hug o' a pismire?"

"Yes, great untamed tempest o' the Red River, I begin to grasp," replied Old Kit; "it war you who felt the lad's pulse when he lay stretched on the plain, and it war your rosebud lips that pronounced him 'dead, poor boy!' Now do you, old buccaneer o' the plateau, begin to comprehend that you know 'bout as much 'bout a boy's pulse as a hull lunatic asylum?"

"Old friends," said Joe in a pacific tone, "I hope you will have no hard feelings about my case, for I am satisfied that you did what you thought was right, and for which I am most thankful."

"Oh, no, Joe, Rattler and me'll not quarrel—we're too glad to meet you alive again; but after you went down in the fight, we made up our minds the demons shouldn't chop and hack you in case we fell, so we bound you on your boss in the most approved style, and started the animal off across the plain."

"I really did 'zamine your pulse, boy," said Rattler, "and never felt the faintest flutter."

"I got a pretty hard rap across the head here," said Joe; "the scalp was cut to the skull and bled considerable. I was also struck by a ball in the stomach which would undoubtedly have killed me but for the heavy broad buckle on my belt. It's probable that I got both blows at the same instant, for I have no recollection of receiving either. But just as soon as my friends had restored me to consciousness, rubbed my almost palsied limbs until the circulation was restored, and bandaged me up till I began to feel like myself again, I began to worry about you folks. I remembered that the last thing I did remember was of our fight on the knoll; so the boys furnished me that pony and eight of them came with me to look you up. We never expected to find you here."

"Thanks to that gal Sybil Bell, who furnished us a horse, we got away from the foe and would have eluded 'em altogether if the boss hadn't fell dead and, fallin' on my leg, held me there fast."

"Do you say that Sybil Bell, or Captain Rachel helped you to escape?" asked Laramie Joe in surprise.

"Yes, sir, she did," answered Bandy.

"Think she's all broke up—hopelessly swamped in a honey puddle o' love with Bandy," said Rattler, with a wink. "She don't know he's a lawfully wedded man."

"But what about Zulima, Joe?" asked Kit.

"She's safe at the Deer Creek Ranch."

"Good! glory!" exclaimed the old detective.

"Thanks to the kindness of a renegade chief, she escaped from the grove where I left her in the presence of a dozen Indians."

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy, "is the mellinnum a-coming? Think o' two acts of generosity from outlaws the same day in the same territory! It's astoundin'. It takes a brain like

Rattler's—Doctor Rattler's—to comprehend the magnitood o' the thing."

"Bandy, s'pose you give that classic tongue o' yours a rest afore you fang yourself," retorted Rattler.

In the mean time the rancheros that had gone in pursuit of the fleeing foe had returned, and with them they brought a stranger, at sight of whom Old Kit Bandy uttered an exclamation of joy, and advancing, took the man by the hand, saying:

"Ichabod, old pard, never did we meet under happier circumstances. How've you been, old chum? Gentlemen," and the old detective turned to the crowd about him, "this man is Ichabod Flea, my old pard of years—one o' the shrewdest, spunkiest old detectives that ever wore hair. This critter here, Ichabod, is Old Tom Rattler, and this lad is the inimical Laramie Joe. Mix up, Ichabod, shake hands all around and make yerself to home and beware o' Old Rattler."

The little old detective, a man of fifty, with a smooth face, a keen sharp eye, and a mouth wreathed in a quaint expression, shook hands around with the party, speaking in a rather sharp, falsetto voice.

After he had spoken to Rattler the latter went over to Old Kit Bandy and looking him square in the eyes, said:

"Old pirate, I'm in a study which to do, knock the stuffin' out o' you or go away out in the canyon and kick myself stupid, blind, or over into Idaho."

"The latter'd be no great job," replied Kit, "but what's got the matter with you now? Taken another spell?"

"I see into a little game o' yours, old cappy. That man, Ichabod Flea, is your old Sabina and your old Sabina is Ichabod. Don't deny it, you lily-lipped hummer!"

Old Kit and Ichabod Flea burst into a peal of laughter.

"Is that true, Kit?" asked Laramie Joe, in surprise and astonishment.

"I can't lie to you, boy, it's so. That old buccaneer is hard to foolish, I can tell you. Ichabod and me's worked together that way for years and years. It's a clever dodge, you can bet."

"And the lies you've told 'bout each other would swamp a hull missionary society in the brimstone lake," declared Old Rattler. "Oh, Kitsie, you are a hull outfit, you are."

"Kit, what you been doin' to your hair and beard?" asked Dick Howard, one of the cowboys.

"An outlaw fanned me and my old chum there with a firebrand. You can see by the stubble-patch on his Adonis mug that it has been shaved by the same barber-ous hand. Oh, we war havin' a royal entertainment jist afore you folks come in; and, boys o' Laramie Plains, I want to say to you now, without jokin', that that man, Old Tom Rattler, is as brave an old buccaneer as ever sailed this ocean of verdure over—a hull mad-house let loose after the keeper."

The rancheros applauded this declaration, and Rattler acknowledged the compliment in a few well-chosen words.

Among the dead outlaws Bandy found the body of Hyena Jim and recovered the letter that Sybil Bell had intrusted to him for her father.

The excitement of the night having finally subsided, the party made arrangements to remain there until morning. Guards were posted in the canyon above and below the hut, although no one had any idea the enemy would return unless largely reinforced, and this was hardly probable since they were so far from the haunts of their friends.

Old Kit and Rattler entertained their rescuers until late in the night with one story after another, told in their inimitable and extravagant language, that kept their auditors in a roar of laughter, and not until the last one of the cowboys had stretched himself on the floor and laughed himself asleep, did the old detective and hunter cease talking and lie down themselves to rest.

CHAPTER XV.

A TRAGIC DEATH.

KIT BANDY was the first to awake in the morning, and, arousing his friends, preparations were soon made for departure down the canyon.

From among the outlaws' horses, most of which had been left in the hands of the victors by those who escaped, Kit, Rattler and Ichabod

Flea were supplied with riding horses, and mounting, all started off, their initial point now being the Deer Creek Ranch.

After journeying a few miles they came to a spring, where the party halted, bathed their hands and faces, and then breakfasted off the supplies that the cowboys had provided themselves with before leaving the ranch.

Thus refreshed, they continued on, and about noon reached Redmond's cattle-ranch.

Laramie Joe's return was hailed with pleasure by Zulima Randall, and her young heart knew no bounds of joy when she learned that the two old plainsmen were safe. Joe introduced her to them, when she and Bandy held a long and pleasant conversation.

Jack Kirby, the superintendent of the ranch, ordered a fatted calf killed and a royal dinner prepared for their distinguished guests, who were to remain over until the morrow by the urgent request of the rancheros. And the calf was killed and a sumptuous dinner prepared, to which all did ample justice.

Old Rattler, by Kit's request, consented to accompany him to Last Lick with Zulima and Laramie Joe. An escort of three cowboys with pack-horses was also detailed by Jack Kirby to go with the party.

As the journey would require several days' travel, a tent for Zulima and a stock of provisions were furnished the party from the ample stores of the ranchmen. With these arrangements all made, the party expected to start the next morning; but as there were several hours yet before that time arrived, the cowboys became quite anxious as to how they should entertain their guests through the evening. One suggested one thing and another something else. They were more particular about what they should do and say on account of Zulima's presence. Rough as they were, and rougher still as they are reputed to be, they showed the most gentlemanly respect to the maiden. Not a word nor act was said nor done that could have offended the most fastidious.

Finally Fred Danton proposed they have a banquet in honor of their guests, and a banquet it was to be, whatever that term implies in a Western cattle-ranch.

So Fred Danton was appointed master of ceremonies, and when night came on, and all had assembled in one of the capacious rooms of the long sod house, he announced the programme, which consisted of music, songs and speeches.

There were three violins in the party, and as many excellent players, and the entertainment was opened with music by this trio of instruments; and as the sound floated out upon the air, there was something in its ravishing strains that touched a chord in the breasts of Old Kit and Rattler—awakening forgotten memories, and sending the blood thrilling through their veins with all the impulsive fervor of youth; and the first thing the party knew the two old men were whirling over the room in the giddy mazes of a waltz, to the infinite delight of Zulima Randall and Laramie Joe.

After the old bordermen had satisfied themselves with dancing, and the music had ceased, the toast, "Our Guests," was proposed, and responded to by Jack Kirby in a very happy speech, for Jack, having once been a lawyer in Ohio, possessed one of the essential elements of the profession, and that was a "gift of gab."

Jack's speech was followed by a song, "Away out in the West," by four of the rancheros, and the song was concluded amid genuine applause.

Then Old Ichabod Flea sprung to his feet and proposed a toast not on the programme, and that was, "Our Hosts." He called on Kit Bandy to respond.

And promptly the old detective came to the front with a bland smile upon his face, and said:

"My friends, it affords me pleasure to say that 'Our Hosts' are a host o' royal princes. In the thirty years that I've been rummaging the West, I have messed with the soldier, affiliated with the outlaw—for policy's sake—donned the paint and feathers of an Ingin, roughed it with the miners, hunted with the hunters and bunked with the cowboys from the Rio Grande to the Yellowstone, but in none of these camps and bivouacs have I ever been received with more hospitality than in the dug-out or sod hut o' the ranchero. In fact, it have always been an exceptional good place to stop, for the average cowboy is a rollickin' good feller, and always has a good supply in his larder. But I'm free to confess that the folks o' Redmond's Ranch are exceptions to a'] I have ever met. That library yander on them shelves, that bountiful supply o' good things to eat in the

store-room, that wash-basin, soap and combs, those assorted kinds o' pipes and abundance o' tobacco—all tells me that the Redmon Ranchmen are men o' intellect. I know them to be brave and darin', for under the lead o' the gallantest boy that ever hopped, Laramie Joe, I have see'd them tried. To the gallant boys o' Redmon's Ranch—to 'Our Hosts,' me and that old buccaneer, Rattler, owes our existence to-night, and language fails me in expressin' my thanks and deep sense o' gratitude to them."

Bandy's speech was enthusiastically cheered; then followed another appropriate song by the "glee-club," after which Fred Danton announced this toast:

"Kit Bandy, the famous mountain detective"—response by Tom Rattler, the hunter."

A slight commotion stirred the little audience. A smile lit up the faces of all, for they now expected something peculiarly novel and interesting.

Old Rattler rose, and with a twinkling in his eyes and that innate spirit of humor lurking about his mouth in a faint smile, said:

"My respected friends, speechifyin' are not in my line o' business, I am free to confess, yit the subject onto which I'm to speak is one so deep and eloquence-inspirin' that I can't he'p but swat it lightly. It has been my gorg'ous pleasure to know Kit Bandy personally for two days, and in that time I've found him to be an old wild-eyed rouser. I find he combines all the elements o' character that war ever represented in the home-circle, the meetin'-house, the hall o' Congress, the insane asylum or the penitentiary (applause by Bandy). I met him under 'bout the same circumstance that a hungry ki-yote meets a wounded deer—I bein' the wounded deer. I hev see'd him stand like a majestic oak, with both hands up, kivered by a revolver in the hands o' a masked woman, and—lie like a trooper (applause). I have see'd him on the full retreat—I war with him at the time—and I can bear witness to the fact that his instinct o' self-preservation is strong. I have stood by his side in battle, when the air was full o' death-whistles, and hearn him cuss the foe's poor marksmanship. I've see'd him—from the brush—in the presence o' a beaucheful woman, his face a honey-puddle o' smiles and smirks, talk love-stuff like an Ambrosia god. I've stood by his side, pinned to a wall by the hands of red and white demons, and sass them in a defiant way borderin' on suicidal recklessness. My friends, thar be no diskount on Old Kit Bandy. As a mountain detective, he's a behemoth success—a lily-lipped hummer. As an Ingin-fighter, he's a hull litter o' hyenas and a Jersey bullian throwed in. As a liar, with fancy trimmin's, he beats that 'un the feller struck when nations heard entranced. As a center-shot, he's as good as—I be. As a love-maker to outlaw weemin, he's a velvet-throated gagger. Nor are these all his noble traits (applause). He is possessed o' as much piety as a Mormon temple, the serenity and calmness o' a buzzard hangin' high above on airy wing. His modesty is like unto that o' a dreamy Ingin maiden, and his meekness and innocence is like unto that o' a hull Sunday-school o' Congo-colored urchins. In fact, he's as many virchoos as war ever planted in a big grave-yard; and to sum it all up, friends, a bigger, braver, nobler heart war never crowded into a human breast than that o' Old Karistopher Columbuss Bandy."

A round of hearty applause followed this unique speech, and then, after another song, a jig-dance by one of the cowboys and another waltz by Kit and Rattler, and the banquet ended with a supper, prepared by the colored cook of the ranch, that would have been a credit to a far more pretentious affair.

Finally all retired for the night, a private room having been carefully and neatly fitted up for the fair Zulima.

The remainder of the night was passed in quiet sleep, but all were astir early in the morning, and shortly after sunrise the party, bound for Last Lick, were in their saddles, "good-byes" were said, and the journey began.

Laramie Joe, with Zulima at his side, took the lead, with Kit and Rattler next, and the escort of rancheros with the pack-horses bringing up the rear.

The first two days of the journey were attended with no excitement, and would have been voted monotonous by men who love excitement had it not been for those two jolly old men, Bandy and Rattler, who kept everybody's spirits in highest glee with their whimsical humor and rollicking stories.

On the morning of the third day, however,

the party was suddenly thrown into a momentary excitement, just as they were breaking camp, by the sudden appearance of a woman on horseback from a wooded canyon, putting into the one they were following. She was recognized at a glance. It was Captain Rachel, the female outlaw, or Sybil Bell, as we shall know her hereafter.

"By the horn o' Joshua! it's Cap Rachel!" exclaimed Old Kit, in astonishment and surprise.

"It are, by the great Rosycrusian!" added Rattler.

"And look out for a band of outlaws at her heels," exclaimed a cowboy, grasping his trusty rifle.

The woman approached the party that had drawn rein to await her coming. A look, half-joy and half-surprise, was upon her handsome face.

"Oh, Sybil! Sybil!" cried Zulima, as her false friend rode up, "is it possible that we have met again?"

"Yes, Zulima, and I thank God for it," replied Sybil, in a tone of humble penitence, "for you more than all others have I longed to see and talk with. Of course you know all. The friends I see around you have told you all. But I am surprised to see Laramie Joe at your side alive. I heard he had been slain; and you, Mr. Bandy, I had fears would never escape the horde that pursued you and your friend across the plain."

"Didn't you intend us to escape, Miss Sybil?" asked Kit.

"I certainly did, and yet, before you disappeared from sight on the plain, the Indians seemed to be gaining on you so rapidly that I became uneasy."

"It weren't me but the message to your father you were most concerned about, wasn't it?"

"I admit that it was, and through fear of its never reaching him, I resolved to go straight to Last Lick and see him, come weal or woe."

"A sensible gal," Bandy said, "so come ride right along with us. We'll cheerfully accept you as one o' our party."

"As an officer of the law, I presume you will consider me under arrest," the girl said, biting her lip to keep back the feeling of distress surging upward in her breast.

"Not by a darned sight, Miss Sybil. I are not makin' war on weemin. I know 'bout the extent o' your outlawry, bein' the darter of an outlaw. Come right along, and consider yourself as free as anybody."

"Thank you, sir," she said, her proud, defiant spirit hopelessly crushed; "I do not merit such treatment, nor could I accept of it, were it not my desire to see my dying father."

With this understanding the party rode on. Kit rode at Sybil's side, and they conversed about various things. The old detective endeavored to draw her mind from her troubles and revive her spirits, but he made little headway—but little impression upon her broken heart.

Zulima treated her with the utmost kindness—such as is due to one in sorrow and trouble. She made no allusion by word or act that would in any way revive a single incident of the terrible past.

On the afternoon of the fifth day of their journey, the party rode into Last Lick. All was quiet in the camp, for most of the miners were at work. But the news of their coming soon spread abroad, and in a few minutes every one was headed toward the Randall cabin.

As the cavalcade drew up before Zulima's home Old Deborah, her old colored friend and servant of years, reaching back into her babyhood, came running from the cabin, her hands up, and one cry after another pealing from her lips.

"Bress de good Lawd in heaben!" she shouted, and she clapped her hands, and then rushing up to Zulima, clasped the maiden in her embrace.

"Bress der Lawd, for sendin' my chile back to me! Oh, honey, how weary you look, chile—and dar am Miss Sybil; but oh, poor chile, I've sad, sad news for you!"

"Is my father dead, Deborah?" cried Sybil, a wild, distressed look upon her face.

"Yes, he is; he died jist few hours ago," replied the negress.

A shriek burst from the girl's lips, and she sunk sobbing to the earth.

Kit and Zulima went to her side, and spoke words of hope and encouragement to her.

By this time the whole population of the town had assembled at the Randall cabin to congratulate Zulima on her safe return, and her rescuers for their noble work.

After Sybil had recovered from the shock she had sustained by the sad news of her father's death, she expressed a desire to look upon his remains.

Deborah led the way to the door of the room wherein the body lay dressed for burial on the morrow, and Sybil passed in.

Those outside heard a wild, piercing shriek come from the room, then there was a long silence which was suddenly broken by the spiteful bark of a pistol and the fall of a body in that chamber of death.

"My heavens, Kit!" cried Laramie Joe. "There's something dreadful happened in there!"

"I'm afraid so, lad," replied Bandy.

Together the two rushed into the room and found their worst fears realized. Sybil was lying on the floor, a smoking derringer still clasped in her hand, motionless—dead!

"Poor child!" sighed Kit, a tear glistening in his eyes, "it's all over with her and she's at peace."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONCLUSION.

THE tragic death of Sybil Bell threw a gloom over the spirits of the miners of Last Lick, and no one felt the force of the blow more than Kit Bandy—not that he felt a guilty responsibility, but because the force of necessity had brought such a dreadful result through the exposure and death of her father.

As soon as the excitement of the hour had subsided Old Kit hastened to the Pick-and-Shovel to see his friend Laclede, the French artist whom he found fast recovering from the effects of his wound.

Shortly afterward, Ralph Hatton, the Vigilante with whom Kit had spoken on the night of the tragedy, called at the tavern in company with two others of the Vigilantes to converse with the detective and pay over the reward offered for the apprehension of Judge Randall's assassin.

"Mr. Bandy," Hatton said when they had been seated, "I presume you are entitled to the reward for the detection and bringing to justice Randall's murderer."

"Then all Last Lick is satisfied that Bell is the guilty party, eh?" replied Kit.

"Fully satisfied," responded Hatton.

"Did he make a confession?"

"Yes, a short time before his death—when he saw he must die, he confessed that he had murdered Randall, and that his true name was Zandt, and that he had been the leader of the outlaw band known as Captain Rachel's band. He said Captain Rachel was his daughter and the title of 'captain' was only honorary—that while she was a queen in the respect and obedience she commanded of the outlaws, she had never led them on a single expedition of outlawry. Zandt admitted that at the time of Randall's murder he had no intention whatever of abducting Zulima, but it seems that one of his men had seen Zulima and become greatly enamored with her beauty and resolved to possess her; and rather than try to win her by fair means he resolved to abduct her at once, and gave Zandt to understand that he must have his assistance, and as Zandt knew of his being a desperate man, having a full knowledge of his—Zandt's—crime of killing Randall, he could not refuse him. To allay suspicion they arranged that Sybil be abducted with her. Barksdale, the scoundrel that wanted Zulima, and three confederates lay concealed in the mountains near, with extra horses for the captives, waiting for an opportunity to kidnap the girls. Of course Sybil was let into the secret."

"Well, they'd waited some two weeks when at last Laclede's entertainment seemed to promise the desired opportunity to strike. Zandt attended it simply to allay suspicion, but it would have been better for him, perhaps, had he stayed away. He had been so worked up over the remarkable skill of Laclede that he could not control his emotions when, after so good a picture of Judge Randall had been produced, as he fully believed, from his clairvoyant revelation, the artist declared that he would reveal the face of the murderer; and in a moment of excitement he drew his revolver and fired at the artist."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Bandy, "it war expected when the idea o' that war entertained that Randall's murderer would give himself away when the time come, but we never 'spect-ed he'd shoot."

"But would the Frenchman really have drawn his picture?" asked Hatton.

"Yes, he would."

"Then he does possess clairvoyant powers?"

"'Bout as much as you and I," replied Bandy. "You see, me and my pard, Ichabod Flea, have been at work on this case ever since the death o' Judge Randall. Slowly, and step by step, we gathered circumstantial evidence that pointed suspiciously to'ards Major Bell. I cannot tell you now how we worked the case up, for it'd take me a week to give it in detail, and then it wouldn't be very interestin'. But when we'd simmered the thing down to Bell the next would be to convict him on the chain of evidence we had. We knew he stood deep in the affections and esteem of Last Lick and that any mistake on our part would bring judgment upon our heads. So we began to figger as to how we could make him convict hisself, and in our ramblin' round through the hills we stumbled across the artist, Laclede. Then the idea o' the entertainment struck me and so I took him into my confidence and laid the scheme before him. Bein' in for adventure he jumped at it like a toad at a fly. Then I furnished him with a portrait of the judge that I'd got from Detective Drew; he practiced on it till he got it perfect, and then in disguise he came to Last Lick and as a festive 'bummer' laid around two weeks studying the faces and features of Major Bell and Zulima Randall, and when he concluded he'd got them well in mind, he come back to the hills and practiced on 'em, goin' back to camp every few days to refresh his mind and compare notes. In this way he got the faces of all three in pretty fair shape for off-hand drawin's; and then he sailed in. We banked considerable on his 'clairvoyant powers' workin' on the superstition o' the miners, and givin' me a hold on the public mind that would enable me to take time to bring to bear in court the chain of circumstantial evidence I'd linked together. Moreover, I'd expected after his arrest, that a few more links would be found to make the chain stronger. But, to sum it all up; the fellow's own guilty conscience give him away, and he has paid the penalty with his life. And now, gentlemen, I want only one third o' the reward; I want Laclede to have the balance, for he deserves it. Genius should be rewarded, especially when it gits its arms shot half off, as did the Frenchman's."

"All right, Bandy, that just as you say," replied Hatton; "you have won the reward by a little bit the slickest scheme I ever heard of. But say, have you any idea what object Bell had in murdering Judge Randall?"

"No, sir; I must confess I hav'n't, but I s'pose he told you, didn't he?"

"Not a word. He had just come to that point in his confession and asked for a sup of water. The water was given him, when his head fell forward on his breast and he never breathed again."

"Horn o' Joshua! you don't tell me?"

"We had hopes, however," continued Hatton, "of Sybil disclosing the secret in case of her return, but now that she, too, is dead, I presume it will go down to the grave with them, unless, perhaps, some time we may get the secret from some one of her confederates in crime."

On the day following her death Sybil and her father were laid at rest in their graves. Whatever the girl's part in her unnatural father's crimes, her untimely death was mourned by all the camp.

Zulima Randall now found herself alone again with old Deborah, but however great had been her suffering—however greatly she had been sinned against, out of it all came a noble reward in the friendship and love of our hero, Laramie Joe, the Boy Knight, who in after years became her protector, her idol, her all.

Kit Bandy and Ichabod Flea, as well as Old Rattler, remained several days at Last Lick, the honored guests of all the camp, but, finally the three departed together for new fields of conquest, and when and where the old "buccaneers" may turn up again, we know not but we can rest assured that men of their impulsive and adventuresome spirits are not likely to remain idle, and there is no telling how soon they may "bob up serenely" in another great drama of the Wild West.

THE END.

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- 20 Deadwood Dick's Defiance; or, Double Daggers.
- 38 Deadwood Dick in Disguise; or, Buffalo Ben.
- 55 Deadwood Dick in His Castle.
- 42 Deadwood Dick's Bonanza; or, The Phantom Miner.
- 49 Deadwood Dick in Danger; or, Omaha Oil.
- 57 Deadwood Dick's Eagles; or, The Parole of Flood Bar.
- 73 Deadwood Dick on Deck; or, Calamity Jane, the Heroine.
- 77 Deadwood Dick's Last Act; or, Corduroy Charlie.
- 100 Deadwood Dick in Leadville.
- 104 Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Double Cross Sign.
- 109 Deadwood Dick as Detective.
- 129 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Gorgon's Gulch Ghost.
- 138 Deadwood Dick's Home Base; or, Blonde Bill.
- 149 Deadwood Dick's Big Strike; or, A Game of Gold.
- 156 Deadwood Dick of Deadwood; or, The Picked Party.
- 195 Deadwood Dick's Dream; or, The Rivals of the Road.
- 201 Deadwood Dick's Ward; or, The Black Hill's Jezebel.
- 205 Deadwood Dick's Doom; or, Calamity Jane's Adventure.
- 217 Deadwood Dick's Dead Deal.
- 221 Deadwood Dick's Death-Plant.
- 232 Gold-Dust Dick, a Romance of Ranges and Troughs.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Divide; or, The Spirit of Swamp Lake.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Death Trail.
- 309 Deadwood Dick's Deal; or, The Gold Brick of Oregon.
- 321 Deadwood Dick's Dozen; or, The Fakir of Phantom Flats.
- 347 Deadwood Dick's Deeds; or, Days in the Diggings.
- 351 Deadwood Dick Sentenced; or, The Terrible Vendetta.
- 362 Deadwood Dick's Claim.
- 405 Deadwood Dick in Dead City.
- 410 Deadwood Dick's Diamonds.
- 421 Deadwood Dick in New York; or, A "Cute Case."
- 430 Deadwood Dick's Dust; or, The Chained Hand.
- 443 Deadwood Dick, Jr.; or, The Crimson Crescent Sign.
- 448 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defiance.
- 458 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Full Hand.
- 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Round-Up.
- 465 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Racket at Claim 10.
- 471 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Corral; or, Bozeman Bill.
- 476 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dog Detective.
- 481 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Deadwood.
- 491 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Compact.
- 496 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Inheritance.
- 500 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Diggings.
- 508 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deliverance.
- 515 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Danger Ducks.
- 534 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr., the Wild West Video.
- 549 Deadwood Dick, Jr., on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Afloat.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Nevada.
- 630 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in No Man's Land.
- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr., After the Queer.
- 642 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Buffalo.
- 648 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Chase Across the Continent.
- 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Among the Smugglers.
- 660 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Insurance Case.
- 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Back in the Mines.
- 672 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Durango; or, "Gathered In."
- 678 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Discovery; or, Found a Fortune.
- 684 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dazzle.
- 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dollars.
- 695 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Danger Divide.
- 700 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Drop.
- 704 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Jack-Pot.
- 710 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in San Francisco.
- 716 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Still Hunt.
- 722 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dominoes.
- 728 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Disguise.
- 734 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Deal.
- 740 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deathwatch.
- 747 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Doublet.
- 752 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deathblow.
- 758 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Desperate Strife.
- 764 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Lone Hand.
- 770 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defeat.
- 776 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Resurrection.
- 782 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dark Days.
- 787 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defied.
- 792 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Device.
- 797 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Desperate Venture.
- 802 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Diamond Die.
- 807 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Royal Flush.
- 812 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Head-off.
- 816 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Rival.
- 822 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Boom.
- 828 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Scoop.
- 834 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Proxy.
- 840 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Clutch.
- 845 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, High Horse.
- 852 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Devil's Gulch.
- 858 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death-Hole Hustle.
- 863 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Bombshell.
- 870 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Mexico.
- 876 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deceitful Duck.
- 882 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Silver Pocket.
- 891 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dead-Sure Game.
- 898 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Drive.
- 904 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Trade-Mark.
- 910 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Tip-Top.
- 916 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double-Decker.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

- 589 Tom-Cat and Pard; or, The Dead Set at Silver City.
- 622 Tom-Cat's Triad; or, The Affair at Tombstone.
- 631 Tom-Cat's Terrible Task; or, The Cowboy Detective.
- 638 Tom-Cat's Triumph; or, Black Dan's Great Combine.
- 546 Captain Cactus, the Chaparral Cock; or, Josh's Ten Strike.
- 568 The Dandy of Dodge; or, Rustling for Millions.
- 576 The Silver Sport; or, Josh Peppermint's Jubilee.
- 583 Saffron Sol, the Man With a Shadow.
- 601 Happy Hans, the Dutch Video; or, Hot Times at Round-Up.
- 611 Blind Barnacle, the Detective Hercules.
- 646 Cowboy Gid, the Cattle-Range Detective.
- 657 Warbling William, the Mountain Mountebank.
- 665 Jolly Jeremiah, the Plains Detective.
- 676 Signal Sam, the Lookout Scout.
- 689 Billy, the Gypsy Spy; or, The Mystery of Two Lives.
- 699 Simple Sam, the Broncho Buster; or, For Big Stakes.
- 712 The Mesmerist Sport; or, The Mystified Detective.
- 738 Toltec Tom, the Mad Prospector.
- 745 Kansas Jim, the Cross-Cut Detective.
- 761 Marmaduke, the Mustang Detective.
- 778 The Rustler of Rolling Stone.
- 785 Lone Hand Joe, the Committee of One.
- 801 Kent Kirby, the High-Kicker from Killbuck.
- 832 The Doctor Detective in Texas.
- 872 Two Showmen Detectives in Colorado.

Other Novels by E. L. Wheeler.

- 80 Rosebud Rob; or, Nugget Ned, the Knight.
- 84 Rosebud Rob on Hand; or, Idyl, the Girl Miner.
- 88 Rosebud Rob's Reappearance; or, Photograph Phil.
- 121 Rosebud Rob's Challenge; or, Cinnamon Chip.
- 277 Denver Doll, the Detective Queen; or, The Yankee's Surround.
- 281 Denver Doll's Victory; or, Skull and Crossbones.
- 285 Denver Doll's Deceit; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
- 368 Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer; or, The Life Lottery.
- 372 Yreka Jim's Prize; or, The Wolves of Wake-Up.
- 385 Yreka Jim's Joker; or, The Rivals of Red Nose.
- 389 Yreka Jim's New Role; or, Bicycle Ben.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective; or, Dot Lettle Game.
- 213 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
- 244 Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret; or, A Sister's Devotion.
- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
- 253 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
- 334 Kangaroo Kit; or, The Mysterious Mine.
- 339 Kangaroo Kit's Racket; or, The Pride of Played-Out.
- 39 Death-Face, Detective; or, Life in New York.
- 69 The Boy Detective; or, Gold Rifle, the Sharpshooter.
- 96 Watch-Eye, the Detective; or, Arabs and Angels.
- 117 Gilt-Edged Dick, the New York Detective.
- 145 Captain Ferret, the New York Detective.
- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
- 226 The Arab Detective; or, Snoozer, the Boy Sharp.
- 291 Turk the Boy Ferret.
- 325 Kelley, Hickey & Co., the Detectives of Philadelphia.
- 348 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Detective.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Baso Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Slabides, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
- 434 Jim Beak and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 26 Cloven Hoof, the Buffalo Demon; or, The Border Vultures.
- 32 Bob Wolff; or, The Girl Dead-Shot.
- 45 Old Avalanche; or, Wild Edna, the Girl Brigand.
- 53 Jim Bludsoe, Jr., the Boy Phenix.
- 61 Buckhorn Bill; or, The Red Rifle Team.
- 92 Canada Chet; or, Old Anaconda in Sitting Bull's Camp.
- 113 Jack Hoyle, the Young Speculator.
- 125 Bonanza Bill, Miner; or, Madam Mystery, the Forger.
- 133 Boss Bob, the King of Bootblacks.
- 141 Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent; or, The Branded Brows.
- 177 Nobby Nick of Nevada; or, The Sierras Scamps.
- 181 Wild Frank, the Buckskin Bravo; or, Lady Lily's Love.
- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado; or, Rowdy Kate.
- 240 Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator; or, The Locked Valley.
- 278 Jumbo Joe, the Boy Patrol; or, The Rival Heirs.
- 299 A No. 1, the Dashing Toll-Taker.
- 308 Liza Jane, the Girl Miner; or, the Iron-Nerved Sport.
- 330 Little Quack-Shot; or, The Dead Face of Daggersville.
- 358 First-Class Fred, the Gent from Gopher.
- 378 Nabob Ned; or, The Secret of Slab City.
- 382 Cool Kit, the King of Kids; or, A Villain's Vengeance.
- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher; or, A Son's Vengeance.
- 446 Senak In Sam, the Sparkler; or, The Tribunal of Ten.
- 913 Kit Keith, the Revenue Spotter.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 490 Broadway Billy, the Bootblack Bravo.
- 514 Broadway Billy's Boondie; or, Clearing a Strange Case.
- 536 Broadway Billy's "Diffikilty."
- 557 Broadway Billy's Death Racket.
- 579 Broadway Billy's Surprise Party.
- 605 Broadway Billy; or, The Boy Detective's Big Inning.
- 628 Broadway Billy's Dead Act; or, The League of Seven.
- 669 Broadway Billy Abroad; or, The Bootblack in Frisco.
- 675 Broadway Billy's Best; or, Beating San Francisco's Finest.
- 687 Broadway Billy in Clover.
- 696 Broadway Billy in Texas; or, The River Rustlers.
- 708 Broadway Billy's Brand.
- 711 Broadway Billy at Santa Fe; or, The Clever Deal.
- 720 Broadway Billy's Full Hand; or, The Gamin Detective.
- 735 Broadway Billy's Business.
- 738 Broadway Billy's Curious Case.
- 753 Broadway Billy in Denver.
- 762 Broadway Billy's Bargain; or, The Three Detectives.
- 769 Broadway Billy, the Retriever Detective.
- 775 Broadway Billy's Shadow Chase.
- 783 Broadway Billy's Beagles; or, The Trio's Quest.
- 786 Broadway Billy's Team; or, The Combine's Big Pull.
- 790 Broadway Billy's Brigade; or, The Dead Alive.
- 796 Broadway Billy's Queer Request.
- 800 Broadway Billy Baffled.
- 805 Broadway Billy's Signal Scoop.
- 810 Broadway Billy's Wipe Out.
- 815 Broadway Billy's Bank Racket.
- 821 Broadway Billy's Bluff.
- 826 Broadway Billy Among Jersey Thugs.
- 833 Broadway Billy's Raid.
- 839 Broadway Billy's Big Boom.
- 844 Broadway Billy's Big Bulge.
- 849 Broadway Billy's \$100,000 Snap.
- 856 Broadway Billy's Blind; or, The Bootblack Stowaway.
- 862 Broadway Billy in London.
- 868 Broadway Billy's Shadows London Slums.
- 874 Broadway Billy's French Game.
- 880 Broadway Billy and the Bomb-Throwers.

- 918 The Trump Dock-Boy.
- 912 Train Boy Trist's Hot Hustle.
- 906 Safety Sam, the Cycle Sport.
- 900 Jumping Jack's Jubilee.
- 887 Battery Bob, the Dock Detective.
- 869 Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery; or, The Golden Keys.
- 869 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
- 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name.
- 424 Cluba John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
- 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
- 467 Disco Dan, the Daisy Dude.
- 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
- 524 The Engineer Detective; or, Redlight Ralph's Resolve.
- 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
- 571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer; or, The Double Case.
- 592 The Boy Pinkerton; or, Running the Rascals Out.
- 615 Fighting Harry, the Chief of Chained Cyclone.
- 640 Bareback Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
- 647 Typewriter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
- 659 Moonlight Morgan, the "Pizenest" Man of Ante Bar.
- 894 Arizona Dick's Wipe-Out.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER.

- 190 Dandy Darke; or, The Tigers of High Pine.
- 210 Faro Frank; or, Dandy Darke's Go-Down Fards.
- 318 The Hustler Rogue-Catcher.
- 338 Poker Pete's Double Dodge.
- 351 The Tie-To Sport; or, High Hustling at Sinners' Flat.
- 388 Monte Saul, the Sport.
- 901 Diamond Dave, the Gilt-Edge Shooter.
- 919 Crack-Shot Daisy's Drop.

BY HAROLD PAYNE.

- 843 Dan, the River Sport; or, Foiling the Frisco Sharp.
- 892 Bowery Ben in Chinatown.
- 911 Bowery Bob, the East-side Detective.

BY BUFFALO BILL (Hon. Wm. F. Cody).

- 3 Kansas King; or, The Red Right Hand.
- 19 The Phantom Spy; or, The Pilot of the Prairie.
- 55 Deadly-Eye, the Unknown Scout, or, The Banded Brotherhood.
- 68 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
- 158 Fancy Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

- 914 New York Nat's Three of a Kind.
- 908 New York Nat's Double.
- 902 New York Nat's in Colorado.
- 896 New York Nat in Gold Nugget Camp.
- 889 New York Nat's Deadly Deal.
- 883 New York Nat's Crook-Chase.
- 877 New York Nat's Trump Card.
- 871 New York Nat and the Grave Ghouls.
- 865 New York Nat's Masked Mascot.
- 859 New York Nat, the Gamin Detective.
- 853 Dick Doom's Kidnapper Knock-Out.
- 847 Dick Doom's Ten Strike.
- 842 Dick Doom's Flush Hand.
- 772 Dick Doom's Death-Grip; or, The Detective by Destiny.
- 777 Dick Doom's Destiny; or, The River Blackleg's Terror.
- 784 Dick Doom; or, The Sharps and Sharks of New York.
- 788 Dick Doom in Boston; or, A Man of Many Masks.
- 793 Dick Doom in Chicago.
- 798 Dick Doom in the Wild West.
- 803 Dick Doom's Clean Sweep; or, Five Links in a Clue.
- 808 Dick Doom's Death Clue.
- 813 Dick Doom's Diamond Deal.
- 819 Dick Doom's Girl Mascot.
- 829 Dick Doom's Shadow Hunt.
- 835 Dick Doom's Big Hustle.
- 749 Dashing Charlie; or, The Kentucky Tenderfoot's First Trail.
- 756 Dashing Charlie's Destiny; or, The Renegade's Captive.
- 760 Dashing Charlie's Pawnee Pard.
- 766 Dashing Charlie, the Rescuer.
- 497 Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.
- 737 Buck Taylor, the Comanche's Captive.
- 743 Buck Taylor's Boys; or, The Red Riders of the Rio Grande.
- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 713 Pawnee Bill; or, Carl, the Mad Cowboy.
- 719 Pawnee Bill's Pledge; or, The Cowboy's Doom.
- 725 Pawnee Bill; or, Daring Dick.
- 692 Redfern's Curious Case; or, The Rival Sharps.
- 691 Redfern at Devil's Ranch; or, The Sharp from Texas.
- 702 Redfern's High Hand; or, Blue Jacket.
- 707 Redfern's Last Trail; or, The Red Sombre Rangers.
- 668 Red Ralph's Ruse; or, The Buccaneer Midshipman.
- 674 Red Ralph's Bold Game; or, The Wizard Sailor.
- 679 Red Ralph, the Shadower; or, The Freebooter's Legacy.
- 644 Butterfly Billy's Disguise.
- 650 Butterfly Billy, the Pony Express Rider.
- 656 Butterfly Billy's Man Hunt.
- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
- 565 Kent Kingdon; or, The Owl of the Overland.
- 570 Kent Kingdon's Shadower; or, the Card Queen.
- 575 Kent Kingdon's Duel; or, The Surgeon Scout.
- 586 Kent Kingdon's Doom; or, The Buckskin Avenger.
- 545 Laffite Run Down; or, The Buccaneers of Barrataria.
- 550 Laffite's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
- 555 Laffite's Confession; or, The Creole Corsair.
- And Fifty Others.

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- 497 Bob o' the Bowery; or, The Prince of Mulberry Street.
- 415 The Vagabond Detective; or, Bowery Bob's Boom.
- 452 Hotspur Bob, the Street-Boy Detective.
- 460 The Lawyer's Shadow; or, Luke's Legacy.
- 472 Jaunty Joe, the Young Horse-King.
- 494 Surly Sam, the Young Ferryman Detective.
- 504 Five Points Phil, the Pavement Prince.
- 509 Jack Jagers, the Butcher Boy Detective.
- 516 Tartar Tim; or, Five Points Phil's Menagerie.
- 526 North River Nat, the Pier Detective.
- 533 Wrestling Rex, the Pride of the Sixth Ward.
- 541 Jeff Ellicker, the Stable Boy Detective.
- 551 Nick Nettle, the Boy Shadow; or, The Old Well Mystery.
- 559 Harlem Jack, the Office Boy Detective.
- 569 Brooklyn Ben, the On-His-Own-Hook Detective.
- 577 Pavement Pete, the Secret Sifter.
- 588 Jack-o'-Lantern, the Under-Sea Prospector.
- 603 Wide-Awake Bert, the Street-Stealer.
- 614 Whistling Jacob, the Detective's Aid.
- 623 Buck Bumblebee, the Harlem Hummer.
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- 649 Gamin Bob, the Bowery Badger; or, Scooping a Slippery Set.
- 658 Sky-Rocket Rob, the Life-Saver.
- 663 Saltpeter Sol, the New York Navigator.
- 694 Spley Jim, the Only One of His Kind.
- 706 Tom Thistle, the Road-House Detective.
- 717 Mosquito Jack, the Hustler Gamin.
- 726 Dennis Duff, the Brown Sport's Kid.
- 744 Dick of the Docks, the Night-Watch.
- 765 Flipper Flynn, the Street Patrol.
- 771 Foxy Fred's Odd Pard; or, The Keener's Huge Hustle.
- 781 Cast-Off Cale, the Scapgoat Detective.
- 824 Bowery Billy, the Bunco Bouncer.
- 837 The Big Four of the Bowery.
- 846 Buck, the New York Sharper.
- 850 The Grand Street Arab.
- 855 The West Broadway Gamin.
- 860 The Boat-Club Mascot; or, Dan Decker's Double Deal.
- 864 The Union Square Baggage Boy.
- 878 The Street Arab's Blind.
- 886 The Five Points Lodging House Janitor.
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- 895 Fifth Avenue Fred, the Valet Detective.
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- 907 Reddy Rusher, Bell-Boy 4-11-44.
- 915 Flip Flasher, Ferret, of East Broadway.

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